ヘヴィオブジェクト

採用戦争

an audition war

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン／凪良 NAGIRYO

電撃文庫

Heavy Object - Volume 02
Adoption War - An Audition War

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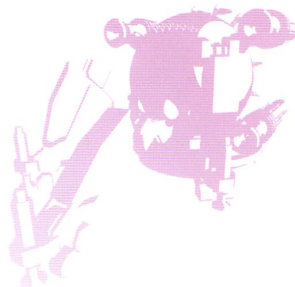

ヘヴィーオブジェクト 採用戦争（さいようせんそう）

超巨大兵器『オブジェクト』が全てを塗り替えたこの世界は、宇宙開発技術採用を巡り熾烈な競争を繰り広げていた。

人生を効率よく生きたい戦地派遣留学生のクウェンサーと、貴族だけど下っ端軍人のヘイヴィアは、上官である和風マニア美女（ただしドS）のフローレイティアにこき使われる日々を過ごしていた。

正統王国のオブジェクト『ベイビーマグナム』を操る『エリート』少女・ミリンダの魅惑のお尻に気を取られ、報われる日が永遠に来なそうな彼らに、今回下されたミッションは……姿が見えない謎の超巨大兵器『ステルスオブジェクト』との交戦!?

氷で閉ざされた南極から、凶暴な軍隊アリに支配されるアマゾンシティ跡地まで、あらゆる戦場に派遣させられる不良兵士二人組の、明るく爽快な近未来アクション……のはずだ！

鎌池和馬（かまちかずま）

本日のレプリカント的観察日記。蟻です。単品の性能のみならず、複数で行動する事を前提とした機能性が素敵。散開と集合のコンビネーションを研究すれば、様々な分野に応用できそうな感じです。

【電撃文庫作品】

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）①～⑳
とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）SS①②
ヘヴィーオブジェクト
ヘヴィーオブジェクト 採用戦争

イラスト：凪良（なぎりょう）

バンダイナムコのゲーム『アルトネリコ』シリーズのキャラクターデザインをつとめる。電撃文庫では『シャープ・エッジ』『F』（著／坂入慎一）、『アブラクサスの夢』（著／高橋弥七郎）などを担当する。個人サークル『S.E.C』でも活動中。http://www.sec.or.tv/

カバー／暁印刷

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI
イラスト・オブジェクトデザイン
凪良 NAGIRYO

結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT
an audition war 採用戦争

BRIGHT HORSE

クラス：第一世代型ヒト型決戦兵器人
ヘイヴィア
「もう、勘弁してよ！　ってか、寒いんだよっ！！　地球温暖化って本当に嘘っていたのかな？」

クラス：第一世代型ヒト型決戦兵器人
クウェンサー
「ここまで来るかったんだと、我慢たなぇ。まぁ、三日で飽きそうだけど」

クラス：第一世代型ヒト型決戦兵器人
ミリンダ
「ハイヒールで来ちゃった。これはこれで、ちょっとおいかけ回されやすい」

クラス：第一世代型ヒト型決戦兵器人
フローレンティア
「そもそも、なんで、つだけ寒いのか？　謎があるの。お姫様のオブジェクトは使えない。小型船でエロリベルトと戻ろうよ」

クラス：第一世代型ヒト型決戦兵器人
スラッター＝バニーサックル
「お姫様なのはいったいっちゃん。なぁ、クウェンサー！　バーボクリュ飲？」

name / Prolaytie=Caplatrano
age / 18
sex / female
piece of birth / Paris, Normandy
height / 173m
weight / 51kg
body size / 97.58.81(cm)
hair color / silver(+ blue dye)
eye color / purple

今のところ、オブジェクトは最強だって言われているな。
誰もがひっくり返らないと信じ切っている。
でも。
こんな歴史の定説だって、いつひっくり返るかは分からないもんだ。
――とある整備兵の世間話

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Prologue

The accepted theories of history are easily overturned.

Take iron for example.

In what era and by what culture was iron first used?

Anyone who answered “the Hittites in the 1400s BCE” are outdated. Since the materials created when iron is smelted were excavated in ruins even older than that in Western Asia, it became clear that theory was incorrect.

It is possible some old textbooks do not contain this newer information, so be careful.

However, there is no way to be sure these Western Asian ruins are the correct answer either. It is possible that iron will be discovered in even older ruins a few years down the road. Once that happens, the information written here will be the same as those old textbooks.

This is nothing special.

It happens in every field.

And Objects are no exception.

The main bodies of those giant machines alone are over 50 meters and the length of the main cannon brings that total even higher. They weigh over 200,000 tons. Those monsters have thick nuclear shelter-level armor, their JPlevelMHD reactors have much greater outputs than nuclear reactors, and that great energy is used to fully power over 100 weapons.

Currently, Objects are said to be the strongest.

Be it the army, the navy, or the air force, no military force can stand up to them, so those giant weapons have become known as synonymous with war. War has become battles between Objects and the winner of the war is decided once one of the two machines ceases to function.

It is quite the established theory.

People believe that no one will ever overturn that theory.

However, no one can ever know when an established theory of history will be overturned. It is possible that someone from a few years in the future would laugh at us if they heard this conversation.

Chapter 1: It is Only Natural to get Muddy in an Obstacle Course > > Battle to Control Antarctica

Part 1

I have an exceedingly important mission for you two!!

"…"

Heivia, a boy of a solid build with short brown hair, thought back on the words of his superior officer as he silently moved his fingers with a look in his eyes reminiscent of a dead fish.

He was in a cramped room.

Inside the room was a table with a pile of small metal devices on top of it. Quenser, a boy with blond hair that did not quite reach his shoulders, sat across the table performing a similar task.

Instead of chairs, they were sitting on cases used to store the shells for the smaller railguns used by Objects. Heivia had no idea how many shells fit inside, but each case was the size of a sofa for three.

The table was also not really a table; it was a large wooden box. It was empty, but it had been crammed between the railgun shell cases to create a work space.

They were loading ammunition.

They had been handed a large number of empty assault rifle magazines, and they were using their fingers to cram bullet after bullet inside. While an inefficient clicking noise was coming from Heivia's magazine, Quenser was using his slender fingers that were like those of a sheltered maiden to systematically carry out the job.

They had started only 15 minutes ago, but Heivia was already down for the count.

He kicked his heels against the railgun shell case he was sitting on and said, "Hey, I can't go on. This isn't war!! With those Objects

that can keep moving after a nuclear blast, loading these puny little bullets isn't going to be of any use!!"

"Heivia, redo that magazine. You used too much force and bent the spring into an S-shape. I can tell from the sound."

"Why do you look so happy!? This annoying work is going to drive me insane!!"

"Eh? Doesn't this kind of trivial job soothe your heart? I'd say running around the wilderness with a heavy rifle is more messed up than this."

"Oh, I didn't realize you Object design students were insane. And what point is there in this? Can't the munitions companies load the bullets in the factories before packaging them and shipping them out?"

"Doesn't storing them inside for so long loosen the spring, increasing the risk of malfunctions? That's why we have to load only the necessary bullets when they're needed and remove them again if they aren't needed anymore."

"Really? Isn't that just the same as printer ink? I'm betting you could keep them in there forever without issue, but they tell you these things so we'll keep buying more."

"Heivia, that magazine's spring is messed up. You need to remove the bullets and redo it."

"Gahhh!!" he shouted out of utter annoyance, but Quenser naturally ignored him.

Heivia was not the type to back off because he received no reaction, so he pointed toward the many cardboard boxes placed next to the large wooden box they were using as a table.

"How are we supposed to finish all of these!? And isn't this something a machine should be doing!? If they got just one machine to do this, we could just set the magazines in it and press a button. Then they would all get loaded automatically like with a soft serve ice cream machine!"

"Aren't they just trying to save on their budget? Everything war-related is centered on the Objects these days. Normal soldiers don't fight anymore. When would a loaded rifle bullet actually be used?

To them, it makes more sense to use their idle soldiers for this than to bring in a ridiculously expensive machine."

"You really have a way of wearing away people's motivation, you know that?"

Fed up with it all, Heivia tossed the assault rifle magazine on the wooden box they were using as a table. He arched his spine backwards as he stretched and glanced behind him.

He spotted a small cupboard.

Heivia casually glanced through the items lined up there, but then…

"Hey, Quenser. Look at what I just found."

"?"

"There's a single porn video mixed in with the training videos.

Part 2

After pushing an incredibly boring job onto two boy soldiers under her command with a smile on her face, Froleytia had headed back to a special officer room prepared on the base. However, the base was really a large scale convoy made up of over 100 large special vehicles, so even her office was similar to a blocky container.

Quenser and Heivia were both 17 and Froleytia was 18. The average age in units was continuing to lower, but that was just a sign of the times. That silver-haired girl was a minor, but no one found it odd that she was commanding a large group of around 800 people. That was simply how things were done.

Currently, Froleytia was using a tablet connected to her computer to recheck the invasion route of her force on their next mission.

As she did, she glanced over at a different monitor.

With a microphone and video camera attached to the computer, it was something like a video chat device. On the other end was a

guest from the safe country that was a great distance from the battlefield.

She could have just had two windows open on her laptop rather than preparing two computers, but Froleytia had a reason to not do that.

This guest was the kind of person that would find it rude to even have her face covered by another window. She only had a rank of three stars, but she acted like it was five stars.

“I see. So how is Heivia doing?”

“Oh, fine. After all, he is the heir to the well-known Winchell family. He would never be put in danger by being sent to the front lines.”

Froleytia said that to move the conversation along, but the truth was that she had used Heivia for everything from loading puny rifle bullets into empty magazines to destroying 50+ meter Objects.

(Well, I’m living quite the unfortunate life myself…)

The guest displayed on the monitor was not aware of any of that. She was a blonde girl of about 15 who was wearing a dress that did not belong in the modern era. However, the corset and other important points had been modified enough that it could be put on without needing someone else’s help. Even if she was a noble girl, it seemed her upbringing had not been so sheltered that she used her servants for everything.

She scratched at her cheek with her index finger and said, “That is fine. Even for me, it would be a waste if he died before that grand ceremony could be held.”

“Excuse me, but I thought the engagement was fiercely opposed by both the Winchell family and the Vanderbilt family.”

“The greater the obstacle, the more it burns within me. You should try falling in love sometime, miss soldier.”

Without thinking, Froleytia shrugged at having that pointed out by an influential noble girl. She shook her long silver hair and tried to change the subject.

“But was this really such a good idea?”

“Was what such a good idea?”

“Having Heivia treated as a private first class. As the heir to the Winchell family, shouldn’t he have at least been an officer such as a second lieutenant? This may sound rude, but a private first class is a bit…”

“Well, I’m sure there were various reasons that went into it. I really don’t know. I do not really care and I have no real knowledge of military ranks, so it really is not my place to comment on it. And if you are going to bring that up, you are the daughter of a noble family and yet you are firing weapons on the battlefield.”

Froleytia cleared her throat.

She had tried to avoid unnecessary trouble by changing the subject, but she had only dug up something worse.

“So may I speak with Heivia?” asked the girl.

“Honestly. I’ll connect the video chat, but keep this a secret. All the others are looking at photos of their lovers and saying they will marry them once they return home.”

“Oh, and I thought that only happened in movies,” said the blonde girl as she fixed her bangs and checked over various parts of her dress. It seemed she was a bit nervous about speaking with Heivia.

(I guess she can be cute at times.)

As Froleytia had that exceedingly rude thought, the noble girl gave one last demand.

“Please connect me to Heivia.”

“Fine, fine. He is in the third ammunition storage’s spare work room. I’ll connect you there.”

Part 3

Quenser and Heivia were facing a computer in a corner of the room. They put in the disk for the porn video and sat tensely while the

media player software started up.

And then plenty of pink porn filled the screen.

“Okay!! I, Jessica the genius intellectual woman soldier, will now make men out of you new recruits who are too afraid to move!! This is an order! Everyone who no longer wants to be a child, leap into my cheeeeeesssssst!!”

“C-commander!!”

“Me too, commander!!”

“I…I…commander…commander!!”

“Wah ha ha ha! Okay, I, Jessica, will do something about this, so everyone come here!!”

While listening to the continued laughing, shouting, and grunts of exertion and watching the flesh and flesh and sweat and flesh and sweat and sweat and flesh and sweat displayed on the monitor, Quenser frowned. He looked back at the package and noticed it was titled “A Cool Female Soldier’s Secret Training of Pleasure and Tits”.

He turned back toward his fellow soldier who had found the video and said, “Um, Heivia? Are you the type of person that enjoys being bossed around by a female commander?”

“No, you idiot!! I was just saying we should enjoy what I found. I wasn’t the one that hid it here!!”

Quenser turned away from the images that were more gaudy than erotic and went back to putting rifle bullets into empty magazines. But…

“…Huh? What? Huh? For some reason I’m working faster than before. Why?”

“Quit slacking off, boy!! Who said you could take a break!? How many times do I have to tell you not to stop until I, Jessica, tell you to!?”

“Waahh!! I feel really motivated for some reason!! I thought this was supposed to be sexy, but I’m making incredible progress by working to the rhythm of her voice!”

“What? My hands are moving on their own. Why do I have this natural feeling that it would be wrong to take a break!? Do you think they could make an effective diet video by having a drill sergeant yelling at you!?”

“Quit yapping and move your fingers faster!! Don’t leave me, Jessica, bored for even an instant!! If you are men, then outdo even my expectations for you!!”

“Yes, Commander Jessica!! We will do exactly that!!”

“Commander! We will show you that we are competent soldiers!! Commander!”

The two boys’ hands started moving faster and faster until they were cramming rifle bullets into empty magazines at what looked like the speed of a sewing machine. As Quenser and Heivia took that task to its limit, they threw off all idle thoughts and became machines that did nothing but accurately put bullets in magazines while breathing heavily.

“Fnhh!!”

“Yesss!!”

Suddenly, they thought they heard the small electronic tone denoting an incoming video chat, and a new window opened over the porn video.

And…

“What are you doing?” said an adolescent blonde girl in a dress with a cold voice and gaze.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!?”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhh!?”

Quenser and Heivia screamed in unison and leapt over to grab the mouse and close the video player playing the porn video.

However, the blonde girl in the window pointed with dull eyes and

said, “Heivia, I see a suspicious package lying on top of that wooden box.”

“Kyaaahhh!!”

That tough, experienced soldier screamed like a girl and knocked the porn video case off of the wooden box acting as a table.

Quenser leaned over and whispered to Heivia in order to gather some intelligence.

“(Hey, Heivia. Who is that girl? She seems to know you.)”

“(I’ll explain more later, but she’s the only daughter of the Vanderbilt family. Her family has about as much power as my own, but she can use pretty much all of her power as a noble while I’m relatively alone and helpless. I can’t let my guard down, so you be quiet and let me do the talking. This isn’t someone a commoner should be angering!!)”

“I don’t have such a short temper,” said the girl.

“I see. But if what milady says was true, I would not have had so many difficulties in the past.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about. Anyway, I do not need a reason to speak with you. As we are engaged, it is unnatural for us to even spend a day without speaking. In fact, if you would contact me, I would not need to do this, Heivia. It is not right for me to have not heard from you ever since you left for the battlefield.”

“Please give me a break. Any emails I write even to relatives are monitored in order to prevent information being leaked. They would find out I use all sorts of cute emoticons.”

Heivia spoke as if he was annoyed, but Quenser realized his tone was different from normal. It lacked its usual edge. Quenser decided it would be best to remain silent, so he went back to loading bullets. He was not one to butt into a conversation between a couple.

“But what kind of room are you in? I thought you were on the front lines performing valiant deeds to gain the right to succeed as the head of your family. Does the Winchell family determine its heir with side jobs?”

“Oh, things can be complex out here. A young lady sipping tea in the safe country probably would not understand how things work on the battlefield.”

“Heh heh. You would think that, wouldn’t you?”

“Ahn? What? You aren’t relaxing in a Paris mansion? …Don’t tell me you’re on your way here or something.”

“Not even I would be so impolite as to enter a base and throw everything into confusion while a war is going on. It is quite the opposite. I am currently headed to the place farthest in the world from this planet’s wars. In this place, the colors of national flags are irrelevant.”

“?”

“Well, if you manage to prove yourself on that muddy battlefield and finally convince those hard-headed members of the Winchell family, you come here too. It is a bit too inconvenient for a primary residence, but it is perfect for enjoying every once in a while.”

And then the door to the room opened wide without so much as a knock.

Quenser and Heivia spun around at the loud noise.

Their long silver haired commander, Froleytia, stood there.

“Quenser, Heivia, we have an urgent job. We need to gather in the conference room.”

“??? Why did a major like you head here directly? Couldn’t you have sent a message?”

“This room is oddly sealed, so radio signals can’t reach it. Also, this video chat was given priority, so I wouldn’t have been able to cut in until the transmission from the Vanderbilt family ended. I only realized that a bit ago. It was my mistake, so I came to get you.”

Froleytia then turned toward the computer’s monitor.

She grabbed Heivia by the back of the neck and said, “As I am sure you heard, I have to borrow him.”

“Yes,” said the blonde girl in the dress with a slight nod. “Work him as hard as you can without killing him, so he can finish with the

military quickly.”

Part 4

Froleytia threw Quenser and Heivia into the conference room and began the meeting with the soldiers who had already gathered there.

“Our stage this time is Antarctica,” said Froleytia as she projected a large map onto a whiteboard. “One of our Legitimacy Kingdom survey planes was targeted by a surface-to-air missile while it was flying along the coast of the Ross Sea. It was exposed to a locking laser.”

“Is our mission to rescue the crew that crashed in Antarctica?” asked Quenser but Froleytia shook her head.

“Fortunately, the plane was equipped with emergency flares. One of those broke the enemy’s lock and they escaped out of their range. The problem is that some idiot in Antarctica was targeting them with a missile,” said Froleytia while grinning. “We directly contacted the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, the Faith Organization, and the other world powers to check, but none of them seem to know who it could have been. Whether they were telling the truth or not, this is being internationally treated as an attack by terrorists not associated with any world power. In other words, no one can complain if we take them out.”

Hearing that, Quenser and Heivia began whispering to each other.

“(Terrorists, hm? I had heard the ones in the Western European safe country could be more frightening than a battlefield where Objects deal with everything.)”

“(Yeah, I’ve heard it said the special forces in the police have a lot more training in direct combat. In fact, dealing with terrorists isn’t really a job for the military.)”

“(The police can’t head out to Antarctica. That’s probably why we’re being sent in.)”

Heivia raised his hand and spoke to his commander.

“So we’re getting them back?”

“This is nothing so uncivilized. The predicted location of the surface-to-air missile from the aiming laser is nearby an unmanned Legitimacy Kingdom observatory. We need to see if it has been destroyed, and if it has not, eliminate the threat to keep it that way. …Simple, right?”

“(So we’re killing them regardless,)” muttered Heivia upon seeing Froleytia’s smile.

Paying him no heed, the commander continued her explanation.

“As I said, the direction the aiming laser came from was used to estimate the location it was fired from. That location is at the base of Mount Erebus which is along the coast of the Ross Sea. We will send out a unit and attack. If possible, we would like to capture them alive to get their objective out of them, but if not, don’t worry about it. It seems killing them all would be no big deal.”

A stir utterly devoid of tension spread through the conference room.

Those monstrous 50＋ meter weapons known as Objects were synonymous with war.

Objects had a certain characteristic. While they had over 100 weapons, those weapons were powered by a high output reactor and the weapons were primarily along the lines of laser beams, low-stability plasma cannons, railguns, and coilguns.

No one bothered putting surface-to-air missiles on them.

In other words, the odds of the supposed terrorists having an Object were quite low. And the Legitimacy Kingdom military could send out an Object filled with their latest technology at any time.

Their victory already seemed assured.

An Object could not be stopped even with a nuclear weapon, so small arms and missiles could do nothing. It was their understanding of that fact that led to all tension leaving the soldiers’ shoulders.

“Oh, right. I have one warning,” said Froleytia. “We cannot use the princess’s Object on this mission. Keep that in mind.”

“Hah?” said Quenser without thinking.

He thought he must have heard her wrong, but Froleytia awkwardly continued.

“Once again, we cannot use the princess’s Baby Magnum. Objects are monstrous weapons that weight over 200,000 tons. Putting one on that icy continent could easily lead to the thick ice cracking and the Object falling through. Then how are we supposed to get it out? I certainly don’t know of a crane that can lift something that heavy.”

“U-umm… I thought we were supposed to be a maintenance unit that ensures the Object can quickly and accurately deploy. What are we supposed to do without the Object?” asked Quenser.

“Well,” said Froleytia as she tapped at the map with a baton. “I expect you to fight the terrorists with smaller weapons.”

Part 5

And so they headed to Antarctica.

The terrorists were supposed to be hiding at Mount Erebus which was near the sea, but Quenser and the others used a boat to land on the coast rather than fly directly there. From there, they and about 100 fellow soldiers slowly approached in a circle around the area. The soldiers taking part in the operation usually acted as guards around the base. As they were also using tanks and attack helicopters, they seemed like a force from an earlier age.

“Are you serious?” muttered Heivia as he walked alongside Quenser. “This is Antarctica. Let me say that again: Antarctica. What am I doing? I was supposed to work in a base for 3 years in order to become the next head of my family. What am I doing here? Has that giant-breasted commander of ours forgotten that I’m a radar analyst?”

“Come to think of it, I came to the base as a battlefield student in order to study the Object, so why am I on this ice continent that doesn’t have the first thing to do with Objects?”

“God dammit. We’re just human antennae. They could just use drones for this.”

“With this gusting wind, UAVs would be hard to use. Also, the radio signal is easy to intercept, so they probably aren’t a good idea for dealing with terrorists.”

“What kind of serious response is that? Did you awaken to your masochist side under that beauty of a commander?”

“I just want to finish this so we can leave. I really don’t care about a job that has no connection to Object designs. Heivia, you need to learn how to just get things over with like an adult,” said Quenser in a bored tone of voice, but it did not seem Heivia was listening.

Heivia looked up into the white sky and said, “By the way, this is Antarctica, right? There’s one thing I’ve been wondering for a bit now. Mind if I ask it?”

“The wonders of nature are outside my area of expertise. If you want an explanation, ask one of the environmental protection organizations.”

“Oh, it’s nothing tricky.”

Antarctica was an ice continent. In some places, the temperature was as low as 50 below zero, making it a true area of frozen earth. In that white land, water spent more time of the year as a solid than as a liquid. The same went for humans. If a flesh and blood body was thrown out into that extreme environment, it would be frozen solid more often than not.

Or so it should have been.

“Why is it so damn hot in Antarctica?” groaned Heivia as he removed the hood of his cold weather coat.

He awkwardly wiped the sweat from his brow and looked around. In the animal documentaries he had seen, the area had been a flat land of pure white, but they were currently standing on a ground made of black stone. Also, white steam could be seen coming up from the ground in places. A powerful crosswind was blowing through and white snow continued to fall from the clouds above, but the steam kept them from feeling cold and the snow melted just before it touched the ground, so it did not accumulate. Nothing matched the image he had had in his head.

Meanwhile, Quenser looked down at the reading from a digital thermometer.

“The seasons in the southern hemisphere are reversed, right? It’s almost summer here. Even so, the air temperature is -3.9 degrees. You’d get cold in no time if you took off your coat.”

“No way. This is below zero? I feel like I’m in a sauna.”

“This is a volcanic area, so a strange heat does temporarily come from the ground. I remember a major eruption 2 years ago that made news by majorly changing the crater. You’re just feeling hot because of that. If you stay still, you’ll start to get cold, so you should put your hood back up.”

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha!!” laughed Heivia without warning.

Quenser looked over with a confused look and Heivia pointed in a certain direction.

“Look, Quenser!! It’s a hot spring. We’re in Antarctica and yet there’s a hot spring coming up from the ground!!”

“…I already told you this was a volcanic area.”

“But it’s a hot spring! In Antarctica!! This place is destroying everything I thought I knew about it!!”

As he spoke, Heivia removed his thick gloves. He crouched down at the edge of the pool of water that had white steam rising from it and stuck his hand in.

“Oh…wow. It feels like it’s a perfect 40 degrees.”

“Stop it, Heivia. If we got in a hot spring, we would just stop caring about this war.”

They were reluctant to leave, but Froleytia was sure to yell at them if they fell into the trap of that hot spring. So the two headed onwards.

The 100+ other soldiers were heading along too, but the circle was so wide Quenser and Heivia could not see any of the others.

They walked across the land of hard, black stone based on the map displayed on their handheld devices. After travelling some distance, the dark ground became covered in white snow and ice. The ground

seemed flat, but it was actually sloped gently down to the extent that a ball would roll slowly forward if it was placed on the ground. The temperature seemed to be slowly falling as well. The white land continued as far as they could see in every direction and they could see no obvious landmarks. Merely looking away from the map was enough to make them feel lost.

Quenser looked down at the small pieces of ice that crunched under their feet as they walked.

“Oh, now this is more like what I expected of Antarctica.”

“Ow!? This isn’t just cold; it hurts! Hey, Quenser. There’s something weird about my face, can you see anything odd there!?”

“The sweat on your face is freezing. I’m guessing it hurts because it’s pulling at your skin.”

“Shit, shit, shit, shit!!” shouted Heivia as he frantically brushed the tiny bits of ice off his face and pulled up his hood. “Dammit! If it’s suddenly going to get Antarctica-like, why can’t it just be something cute with penguins!?”

“This much ice is quite a sight. You’d probably get sick of it after a few days, though.”

“Why are you taking this so well, Quenser? Are you from some cold country?”

“No. I’m more fed up with ice than anything,” said Quenser with a shrug. “When I was in my safe country school, we did all sorts of experiments with breaking rectangular sheets of ice to teach us the basics of Object armor. We would see how the cracks would run through it by striking it in different places.”

“Why ice? Object armor is made of steel.”

“With water, it’s easy to reuse. With a freezer, the experiment can be repeated as many times as you want. Also, we just needed to learn the basics of how the cracks worked, so there was no reason to use steel plates fine-tuned with highly flame resistant reactive material that requires an expensive artisan. By mixing in some chemicals to increase the viscosity before freezing it, it cracks the same way. We also performed experiments where we found more efficient means of absorbing impacts by destroying the balance of the viscosity,” said Quenser with a sigh.

It was due to how boring he found those school lessons that he had actually headed out to the battlefield.

Quenser then changed the subject.

“Come to think of it, what are the terrorists doing in the middle of nowhere like this? Did they get a surface to air missile just for some sightseeing?”

“You know nothing, Quenser,” responded Froleytia over the radio. “Antarctica has been an area of intense competition between many nations over who has rights to what areas even before the UN was destroyed.”

“…? I thought Antarctica had no national borders?”

“Because it has none, various forces have tried to claim it for themselves and have gotten in fights over it. Antarctica has iron and coal mines after all. The ocean also has plentiful areas to fish. It has plenty to compete over,” explained Froleytia offhand. “Currently, the powers claiming rights to Antarctica are the Oceanian military nation that was destroyed before, Western America’s Central Valley area of the Capitalist Corporations, the Chonos Archipelago area of the Information Alliance, and the southern Great Britain area of the Legitimacy Kingdom.”

Quenser frowned at that.

“Oceania and the Chonos Archipelago are in the southern hemisphere, but West America’s Central Valley is around Los Angeles, right? And southern Great Britain is where London is… Those areas have no connection with Antarctica.”

“They are bringing out their pioneering spirit and insisting the people who first discovered the continent have a claim. If it went in the order the expeditions were sent out, they would have the best claim, but that thought process does not take the concerned parties into account just like during the Age of Exploration.”

That meant the terrorists (or so they were officially being called whoever they might actually be) must have targeted the Legitimacy Kingdom survey plane with a surface-to-air missile due to trouble related to either Antarctica’s territories or resources.

(But that is not the real issue. In this age of Objects, the soldiers like us being forced to run around with a gun have it worst…)

“Do you have something you would like to say, Quenser?” asked Froleytia.

“N-no!! Nothing at all!!”

“I have one piece of good news for you. You need not get into a firefight with the terrorists once you find them. Our wonderful Object is on standby at the Ross Sea, so our cute waitress can blow them away with a long distance barrage once you get us their location.”

“Then,” said Heivia with his breathe showing up white in the cold air. “Couldn’t you have just used a military satellite instead of having us walk all the way there? In this day and age, you can get a villa on the moon and shuttles are either launched by laser space elevators or mass drivers. Satellites are as plentiful as empty cans on the side of the street. But I suppose I can’t expect a commander giving orders while sipping hot cocoa on the bridge of an assault landing aircraft carrier to understand how we feel shivering in the cold.”

“Things get a bit tricky when it comes to the Arctic or Antarctic,” Froleytia replied smoothly while completely ignoring that last disagreeable comment. “A geosynchronous satellite using the centrifugal force of the earth to hang near the equator can’t see this far. Some satellites do orbit perpendicular to the equator, but they can only monitor an area during a specific time of the day.”

“Don’t they have satellites that stay exactly over the earth’s axis outside the atmosphere?”

“Yes, but that is right in the middle of an area of disputed ownership. ‘Exactly over the earth’s axis’ is practically a pinpoint, so only so many satellites can be there. The Legitimacy Kingdom has a powerful advantage over the North Pole, but that also means we do not have a single satellite over the South Pole.”

“And so you are making up for that lack of equipment by shoving this insanely inefficient workload onto us human soldiers,” said Heivia with a sigh and a frown. “This isn’t something a civilized human should be doing.”

“Heivia, civilized humans have something known as manners. Do you get my meaning?” replied Froleytia.

Heivia was about to give a light reply, but before he could…

A rifle bullet struck the ground between Quenser and Heivia.

(An enemy attack!?)

The two immediately tried to take cover, but they realized the snowy plain gave them nothing to hide behind. Heivia grabbed Quenser's shoulders and forcibly pulled him backwards. Even on that flat plain, the ground has slight ups and downs. They retraced their steps a few meters to a protrusion in the snowy plain and hid behind that cover created by the icy ground.

"(What, what, what!? Is this those terrorists!?)"

"(Who else would it be!? We almost died out here in Antarctica. If it hadn't been for this strong crosswind, one of us would definitely have been killed by that initial shot!!)"

"(This area is both volcanic and ridiculously cold, so it has major temperature differences. They've been here longer than us, so the metal of their gun barrels or sights may have altered somewhat.)"

As they spoke back and forth in hushed voices, rifle bullets intermittently struck the white ground and sent ice crystals up into the air. The impact points were scattered. It may have been due to the crosswind that they could not hit their targets as Heivia had said, or it may have been due to numerous other smaller reasons piled on top of each other.

Still lying on the ground, Heivia held up his rifle with the sight attached that could pick up data from various sources such as the infrared and ultraviolet spectrums.

"(Their distance is 200 meters. There are 7…maybe 8 of them. The rifles they are using are those ones with the wooden stocks. They have forcibly attached grenade launchers with electrical tape.)"

"(Can you take them out?)" asked Quenser.

"(Why do you make it sound like you're just a spectator? You should be pulling out your handgun or PDW!!)"

"(Sorry, but I don't have any guns. I only have the usual explosives.)"

"(What are you even here for!?)"

Heivia was about ready to strangle Quenser, but then a rifle bullet struck the ground nearby. He frantically lowered his head and fired his own rifle back to hold the enemy in check.

“(Shit, shit, shit!! I’ll strangle you later, but I still need to ask! Why did you head off to fight terrorists without a single bullet!?)”

“(To be honest, I really did want to bring some!)”

“You can’t, Quenser,” cut in Froleytia. “A student who has not finished training cannot be authorized to carry a soldier’s firearm.”

“(Yeah, but doesn’t it take even more delicacy to handle explosives?)”

“You used explosives in your anti-shock experiments related to the shape of Objects back in your safe country school, didn’t you? That is why you have authorization for those. Also, that line of thinking is the sign of a boy who does not know how frightening an accidental discharge is.”

“(I see…)” responded Quenser faintly just as a terrorist bullet shot chunks of snow into the air right next to him.

At that point, Heivia snapped.

“Quit sitting around and do somethiiiinnnngggg!! Why am I the only one risking his life to fight back!? We know where the enemy is, so have the princess use her Object to blow them awaaaaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyy!!”

“Oh, that’s right, that’s right,” said Quenser as he set his radio’s frequency to contact the Object.

The response he received was brief and clear.

“At that location, the shockwave and radiant heat would blow you two away as well. Are you okay with that? Over.”

“Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, fuck!!” shouted Heivia as he gave repeated quick bursts of 2 or 3 shots with his rifle.

Meanwhile, Quenser contacted their allies in the area, but none of them were in a position to arrive any time soon.

“Dammit. They aren’t lying about their position to avoid getting caught up in this, are they?”

He wanted to throw his weapon down and leave, but with the bullets flowing above, carelessly lifting his head would likely get him killed. Two hundred meters was relatively close range for rifles, so it was only due to the powerful crosswind and the plain white area affecting their visual comprehension that kept either side from hitting the other.

The enemy soldiers must have been more used to it because they were gradually spreading out. Only a few meters had opened up between the enemy soldiers, but they were clearly trying to circle around via different routes.

Quenser almost lifted his head up in shock, but Heivia held him down. Immediately afterwards, a bullet flew directly over his head.

Still covered in snow, Quenser said, “This is bad, Heivia!!”

“You mean that the enemy is splitting up to circle around on either side!? I already know! The problem is that there is nothing we can do about it!!”

“No, not that!! A penguin!!”

“Hah!? Who cares about a penguin right n-…A penguin!?”

“It’s a baby! A baby penguin!!”

With a shocked look, Heivia looked over in the direction Quenser was pointing. A small gray baby penguin was waddling awkwardly across right in the middle of the area between the soldiers firing rifles at each other.

It was going to be caught up in the firefight, but they could not exactly stop either.

Just as the veins in Heivia’s temple were bulging out in anguish, something odd occurred.

Just as he was about to remove his finger from the trigger, the terrorists stopped firing as well.

The only motion left on that white land was the baby penguin continuing to waddle along while paying no heed to the soldiers on the front line of a battlefield.

With sweaty palms, Quenser and Heivia watched its progress.

“(C’mon!! You can do it, baby penguin!!)”

“(Wait, why is it just the baby!? Doesn’t the parent need to be watching over it!?)”

And then the baby penguin tripped.

“Waahh!!”

“No, Heivia!! No human intervention is the rule of nature!!”

Heivia very nearly rushed out to help, but Quenser frantically stopped him. Meanwhile, the baby penguin used its small wings to force itself back on its feet.

“Gyah!” came a new avian cry.

“An albatross!?”

“It isn’t going to eat it, is it? It isn’t going to attack from the sky, is it!?”

Yet the rule of nature came into play again.

While Heivia was trying to aim his rifle at the sea bird and Quenser was trying to stop him, the albatross spread its wings wide and readied its aim from up in the heavens. The baby penguin that’s silhouette looked like a fluffy ball had no idea that it was being targeted.

And then the albatross attacked.

The penguin’s natural enemy soared down from the sky like a spear. Its deadly beak was accurately targeting the baby penguin.

Everyone envisioned the color and scent of blood.

Quenser and Heivia forget about fighting over the rifle and brought their hands up to cover their eyes.

But the tragedy they expected did not occur.

“Kmyaaaaaaaahhhhh!!” came a new cry from the side.

“!? Wh-what was that, Quenser!?”

“I think the mother is here. It’s the penguin’s mother!!”

Frightened by the warning cry, the albatross's aim was thrown slightly off. The beak just barely grazed the baby penguin and it gave a high pitched cry for its mother.

The albatross did not seem willing to give up. It soared back up into the white sky, flew in a wide arc, and then aimed for the baby penguin once more.

However, the baby was no longer alone.

The large mother rushed over to act as a shield.

There was no guarantee the mother could save the baby.

The sea bird's sharp beak and talons were enough of a threat for an adult penguin.

Even so, the mother penguin's gaze did not waver.

It spread its wings that were meant for paddling through water, opened its beak as wide as it could, and let out warning cry after warning cry as loudly as it could.

Quenser and Heivia both held their breath.

The terrorists across the snowy plain were also silently watching on.

And then…

The albatross circled above the two penguins' heads a few times before giving up. It left its previous trajectory, gave a defiant cry, and flew off into the white sky.

The penguin mother had protected its child.

In that instant, a great cheer as if from a stadium erupted within Antarctica. It sounded as if all of humanity was letting out a cry of

joy at the familial love of those penguins. Quenser and Heivia embraced each other and the enemy soldiers could be seen lifting their rifles up in both hands like barbells in a show of passion. The spiral of joy surrounding the penguins seemed to surprise them. The baby hid in the small space between its mother's legs and the two animals quickly left the area. Normally the male would have been doing this, but for some reason it was the mother.

After about 10 minutes, the penguins had cut across the battlefield, headed down a slight slope, and completely disappeared from Quenser and Heivia's view.

Before long, the penguin fever quietly came to an end.

Immediately afterwards, both sides began the firefight anew without hesitation.

Quenser and Heivia hid as best they could. As Heivia pulled the trigger, he cried out with bloodshot eyes.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!! Fire fire fire fire fire!!"

"Dahhh! Dammit! I guess we really can't come to an understanding!!" yelled Quenser as he operated his handheld device.

In Antarctica, everything was white no matter where you went, so he zoomed in and out of the map repeatedly to double check everything.

Seeing that, Heivia cried out in an annoyed voice. "What good will checking the map do us!? We can't get help from the princess! The enemy is just going to split up and circle around!!"

"Let's take care of them before that happens." Quenser pulled some Hand Axe plastic explosive out of his bag. He stabbed the radio-receiver-equipped electric fuse into it. "When I give you the sign, fire like crazy to hold them back. I'll throw this during that time."

"Do you know how far away they are? That's 200 meters. Not even a long throw with a regulation baseball can go that far."

"I don't have time to explain! Do it now!!"

"Already! Shit!!"

Still complaining, Heivia held up his rifle. Instead of carefully aiming for one enemy, he fired across all the enemies while swinging the rifle barrel in a fan shape.

As a result, his accuracy dropped even further, so his bullets did not even come close to hitting. However, it frightened the enemy soldiers enough to send them behind cover.

Quenser lifted himself up and threw the plastic explosive with all his might. The Hand Axe flew through a long arc, but it did not reach the enemies just as Heivia had expected. Also, the wind prevented it from flying exactly straight forward. Given how powerful the crosswind was, it must have taken quite some effort to throw it over 50 meters as Quenser had done. It landed on a patch of thick ice, so the Hand Axe slid along even further like a curling stone. The gradual slope of the snowy plain in that direction also helped, so the plastic explosive gained even more distance as it slid across the ground.

Even with all those factors, 120 meters was its limit. It was nowhere near the 200 meter distance of the enemies.

Heivia clicked his tongue and shouted, “Dammit! I told you!!”

“This is fine! This is what I wanted!! Get down, Heivia!!” Quenser shouted back as he used his thumb to send the detonation signal via his radio.

Heivia was doubtful, but the result came immediately thereafter.

With a great roar, a 200 meter long portion of the white earth ahead of them caved in.

It was like a giant pitfall. The earth crumbled and collapsed down a few hundred meters. The snow, ice, and soldiers on top were all swallowed up.

There was nothing they could do about it.

The enemy soldiers who had been firing bullet after bullet fell into the pit with shouts of surprise.

“Good, that seems to have worked,” said Quenser with a sigh of relief as he took his thumb off of the radio he had used for the detonation. “All I want to know about is Object design, so why do I keep learning new ways to kill people?”

"…Um, what just happened?"

"The area they were standing on was really and truly 'on top of the ice'. A thick sheet of ice was covering the gap in a V-shaped stone cliff and nothing but a giant gap existed below. Thanks to the volcanic activity in this area, the space below had become something like a river. It was thick enough that a diesel snowmobile could have passed over without it budging, but it was not enough to withstand military explosives."

"Oh, so that's why you were checking the map."

"I can see why they won't send the Object out here."

Quenser looked into the depths of the ice cliff he had created. He could not see the bottom within the deep, deep darkness. If an Object broke through that ice, a crane that could lift 200,000 tons would be needed. And of course, humanity had no such thing.

"Come to think of it, you did mention performing experiments with breaking sheets of ice back in your safe country school."

"It was nothing this rough," said Quenser with a shrug. "But aren't you glad I brought these explosives?"

"Either way, I still feel like strangling you."

Part 6

Quenser and Heivia trudged on through the snowy plain.

Before long, they arrived at their destination.

The ring of soldiers surrounding the area had tightened in enough at that point that they could catch glimpses of their fellow soldiers approaching via different routes. When an ally waved at him from across the white landscape, Quenser waved back.

"Y'know, it really is a relief to have so many familiar faces around."

"You idiot! There are other ways of giving signals!! Waving your hand now is like using a smoke bomb to tell the enemy where we

are!! We just killed some of them, so they're probably on high alert!!"

The fellow soldier must have received a similar warning because he was struck over the head and dragged out of sight.

Heivia trembled and his breath was white in the air as he said, "I've had enough of Antarctica. It's too damn cold!! I thought the southern hemisphere was supposed to be heading into summer!! I'm having a hard time believing global warming is actually happening right now! It's plenty cold here!!"

"That's only because you don't know the average temperature here. At the very least, I certainly wouldn't want to take a walk at night here."

As they muttered to each other, a transmission came in over the radio. It was from the princess as she waited at the Ross Sea in the Baby Magnum.

"With all the heat produced in this airtight area, I am roasting. I want this over with as soon as possible. Quenser, did you mess up the maintenance on the air conditioner?"

"Dammit, the princess's castle sounds as wonderful as ever."

"Ahh, it is so hot. No one can see, so maybe I should strip off this special suit. I doubt I will have to deal with any high speed battles."

"Are you trying to raise our body temperatures through our imaginations?"

"?"

As Quenser frowned, Heivia seemed to have truly lost all motivation.

"I would like to again point out that this is crazy," he groaned. "We're soldiers that are meant to protect the area around a safe base. We aren't suited for special missions where we're sent out to attack a terrorist stronghold."

"Huh? Are there different kinds of foot soldiers?"

"Oh, c'mon. That isn't something I want to hear from someone on the front lines! At the very least, you should know that the jobs you

should get are very different from the ones I should get!!"

"You seem pretty full of yourself, Heivia. I may just be a student, but the others are soldiers in the same base as you."

"We may call them all soldiers, but we became soldiers in different ways. Some go to a military academy and others go through a short-term training course. Depending on what area of the military you want to go into, your route changes. Most of those in the base went through a yearlong training school. Not many went through the 6 month training course like I did."

"Wouldn't the ones that trained for twice as long be stronger?"

"Quenser, do you think someone who sat in a desk for a year would be stronger than someone who crawled through the mud for 6 months? Also, most people have to repeat the short-term training course at least twice before passing. The ones like me who graduate in just the 6 months are quite rare."

"Either way its something like an amusement park compared to back in my day when we had to run around with a rifle," cut in Froleytia.

Her phrasing made it sound like she was some old woman, but she was really only 18. Quenser had to wonder just how long she had been on the battlefield.

"By the way, why did you choose that muddy course, Heivia?" asked Quenser.

"Ahn?"

It was either due to the sense of calm after ending one firefight and confirming no enemies nearby or due to their wanting to procrastinate having to head to the next battlefield, but Quenser and Heivia continued chatting.

"Well, you're a noble, right? Surely there's some special course for nobles. One where you get to be a 2nd lieutenant as soon as you graduate."

"Oh, that would be the military academy. Even commoners can get into those. Once you get up to the generals, you find almost nothing but nobles, but a commoner can make it as far as brigadier general if they work hard."

“So why are you at the very bottom as a private first class?”

“Various reasons. To have the rights to my family, I need to show off that I’m actually fighting to defend a base and aiding the country rather than watching on from some grand post.”

“But you just laze around the base regardless,” added Froleytia.

“Well, I don’t tell them that. It’s all about appearances. Also, it’s not like the actions of a single soldier on an Object-dominated battlefield is going to ‘aid the country’. I never expected to be kicked out into the middle of Antarctica like this.”

“Nobles sure have it tough. Whenever I hear about this kind of difficulty, it makes me glad I’m a commoner,” said Quenser.

“I’d be more worried if I was a commoner. Even if the parliament has been opened up somewhat recently, nobles still have control of the center of government. Doesn’t it worry you that you have so few opportunities to let your voice be heard by the government?”

“Politics is such a pain. As long as someone is taking care of it, I don’t really care.”

“Really? I guess that’s what they call the apathetic demographic.”

As they continued to speak quietly to each other, they suddenly stopped walking.

After a low hill was the base of Mount Erebus.

Quenser and Heivia naturally hid atop the snow and viewed the area through binoculars and a rifle scope respectively.

However, the base area was quite large. The snow being blown by the crosswind made the area hard to see. What they saw through their respective lenses was a sharp slope after a few kilometers of flat plain.

Similar to a gate leading to a road up the mountain, a single rectangular building sat at the point between the plain and the slope. It must have been the Legitimacy Kingdom unmanned observatory. On the snowy plain near it, cylinders 80 cm thick and about 9 meters long lay on their sides. It was not just two or three of them. At set intervals, about 50 of them were placed such that they spread across a few kilometers.

Quenser and Heivia looked puzzled.

“(Supposedly, the targeting laser for the surface-to-air missile that attacked the survey plane was around here.)”

“(Where are the rest of the terrorists? Don’t tell me they couldn’t stand the cold and left.)”

“If they’re keeping warm in the unmanned observatory, we can just attack them, but this could be a pain otherwise,” said their commander, Froleytia.

“Why?”

“We’ll be ordered to search for these terrorists even if they might not be here anymore. We’ll have to search for them in every nook and cranny of this freezing continent. Even if the terrorists are long gone from Antarctica, we might have to continue the search until we are absolutely sure.”

“Seriously? Hey, Quenser, let’s go check the unmanned observatory already. If we let them get away, we’ll end up freezing to death. Hurry, hurry. C’mon, let’s hurry this up so we can get back to some warm blankets and heaters.”

“No, Heivia. Rushing like that will get you shot in the head.”

As they argued in hushed voices, Quenser and Heivia crawled slowly along the snowy plain. They caught occasional glimpses of others moving along in the same way. They were other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers and their reactions had been about the same. They wanted to get the job over with, but they were also wondering what those huge cylinders were.

As if to say what they were all thinking, Heivia said, “In this age where 50 meter Objects fight, flesh and blood soldiers running around shooting each other with guns is utter nonsense. Whatever strategy our enemy might have, they can’t win with the princess’s Object waiting in the Ross Sea. Really, they should just give up. Dying for something like this is just stupid.”

“Hey, Heivia. I’ve been wondering about something,” said Quenser as he looked around while still lying on his belly. They had crawled about a kilometer through the snow at that point. “What are those weird cylinders lying around the unmanned observatory?”

“Ahn? Aren’t they just antennae used for the observatory? They’re probably put down like that because of the strong crosswind,” said Heivia offhandedly, but he really had no confidence in his answer.

And then Quenser got his answer from a different source.

The 80 cm thick, 9 meter long cylinders all moved as one, centered on a single point.

A giant gun battery supported by a platform with a low center of gravity had suddenly turned its sights in Quenser and Heivia’s direction.

“…Hah?”

In that instant, Quenser and Heivia were unable to move their bodies as they wished. Even as they stared blankly, they were able to comprehend what the scene before them meant.

They had seen that scene before.

They knew what it was that was targeting them.

It was…

The spares for the giant cannons created to be put on a giant Object.

The 50 cannons that were lined up at even intervals all aimed at the snowy plain where Quenser and the other soldiers were.

“Ooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

Quenser and Heivia realized what was happening, they shouted, and they rolled across the snowy plain as quickly as they could.

Immediately afterwards, the cannons roared.

It seemed the ones installed there were railguns.

Countless shockwaves erupted out and Quenser’s body floated up into the air. A few seconds later, he was slammed back down into the cold snow and started rolling but this time not because he wanted to. The cannons had not directly hit him. If any of them had, his body would have been blown to pieces. His puny body had merely been struck by the shockwaves created when they were fired.

However, it had been enough to stop his breathing.

“Gh…bh!?”

He bent his back like a bow and somehow managed to suck in some air. It was likely due to the cold freezing over the moving parts of the cannons that he had not been directly hit. However, the heat caused by the motors would soon eliminate that. Miracles like that would not continue forever.

(I’ll be killed!?)

Standing up would just get him shot, but that flat plain had no real place to hide either. The enemy had lured them out there for that very reason.

(Dammit. Why do they have railguns prepared!? They used an old fashioned surface-to-air missile when they targeted the Legitimacy Kingdom plane!!)

Quenser had no idea what to do.

As he panicked, he heard Heivia’s voice call out to him.

“Quenser!! Get down here!!”

He did not know what that meant, but figured it out once he looked around the area. The first wave of shockwaves had opened a huge crack in the earth. It was over a meter across. Heivia had climbed down into that naturally occurring trench and was sticking his head out to shout.

Quenser rolled across the snowy plain and entered the crack that passed nearby.

Just as he fell inside, the railguns began their second wave.

The after-effects alone created a noise like an aerial bombing and all oxygen was squeezed from Quenser’s lungs even inside that crack.

Heivia noticed and ran over to him.

“Damn, this is no joke. Those terrorists have prepared a ton of Object spares. Was this supposed to be like an anti-tank position from wars in the old days!?”

“What’s that?”

“We had boring lectures on various forms of classic warfare during the history lessons in training. Battle positions where they would lure in enemies and bombard them from both sides were used in wars in the old days. Back then, they used anti-tank guns, but they sure have changed that. Shit!! Isn’t this a bit much for foot soldiers!?”

Quenser wondered how many of their allies had crawled into cracks as well. He hoped all of them had gotten into some crack or another, as any that hadn’t had likely been killed.

Heivia leaned up against the wall of the crack and asked, “Do you know what the worst thing about this is, Quenser?”

“That those Object cannons can fire in any direction despite being spares?”

“No,” said Heivia with his brow covered in sweat. “If they’re using Object cannons, they must have a reactor capable of powering them.”

“Wait, you mean…”

“Like hell these are terrorists!! They have an Object!! They have one hidden somewhere and have some thick power cable connecting to these railguns. Even if we escape here, we might find an Object waiting for us!!”

Hearing confirmation from someone else sent a chill down Quenser’s spine.

The giant weapons known as Objects had thick armor on the level of a nuclear shelter and reactors with outputs that outdid even nuclear reactors. And they used that great electrical output to create a storm of lasers or low-stability plasma cannons. Only another Object could stand up to that. No matter how much a flesh and blood soldier struggled, it was exceedingly difficult to do any damage to one.

However…

“Heivia. Sorry, but we don’t have time to discuss what to do next.”

“Ahn?”

“Look down!! The shockwaves are spreading the crack! At this rate, we’ll fall down so far we can never crawl back out again!!”

Heivia looked down toward his boots in shock. The crack was indeed widening, and quickly. However, carelessly crawling out would only have them fall victim to the countless railguns. They were damned if they did and damned if they didn’t. If they did not resolve the problem quickly, they would be killed.

“What do we do, Quenser? Those cannons are giant lumps of steel. A rifle isn’t enough to destroy them!!”

“Yeah, and I don’t have enough Hand Axe to blow up each and every one of those things. Not to mention that I can’t think of any safe way of approaching them.”

“Can we break the ice beneath them like with those terrorists?”

“Unfortunately, they’re on top of ground with proper bedrock. And even if we could, we would be caught up in the middle of it all as well.”

Having said that, Quenser altered the frequency of his radio.

He was contacting the princess who was waiting in the Object floating in the nearby Ross Sea.

“Calling Baby Magnum. Do you have our position? Can you take out some of the cannons from there?”

“The mountain is in the way, so I cannot target them directly. I could fire a coilgun in a large arc to avoid that, though.”

“What would your accuracy be?”

“About 50/50. I could blow them all away with a carpet bombing, but that would blow you away too.”

The Baby Magnum’s main cannons were intended to directly fire on enemy Objects rather than fire in long distance arcs. With the irregular winds at high altitudes, pinpoint accuracy would be very difficult.

Meanwhile, the railguns’ third and fourth waves shook the ground beneath Quenser and Heivia’s feet. The enemy likely knew they were hiding in the cracks and were trying to bomb them out.

Quenser grimaced as the vibrations hurt his eardrums, but then he suddenly raised his head.

“Baby Magnum! Even if you can’t target accurately, you can still reach this area, right!?”

“Y-yes. I can do that, but…”

“I’ll give you instructions on the grid!! Using Coordinate 000212 as the standard, target W-11, J-18, G-26, M-19, L-27, B-20, and R-12!! Even with the wind, that should avoid any allies with a margin of error of plus or minus 5! Send those huge coilgun shells raining down right away!!”

“I do not think that will hit the enemy either.”

“Just do it!! That will solve everything!!”

“?”

The princess still had no idea what he was after, but she seemed to realize it was an emergency situation where every second mattered. Even without an explanation, she followed those instructions.

A different loud noise from before reverberated throughout the area. Due to being between two mountain-like walls, it sounded a bit muffled to them.

The Baby Magnum’s coilguns were supposed to be fired at a speed much faster than the speed of sound, but these were being fired at a lower speed (and therefore lower power) so they could fall in an arc on a specific point. For once, the sound arrived before the shells.

However, it was no time to be impressed by something like that.

Quenser grabbed the edge of the crack with both hands and shouted to his fellow soldiers through the radio as he dangled down.

“Hang on!! The cracks are probably about to widen and collapse!!”

“Hey, what was the point of this!?”

Heivia did as instructed while utterly bewildered, but there was no time to explain.

The coilgun shells rained down from above.

The masses of steel mercilessly stabbed into the bedrock and shook the ground like an earthquake.

The shells weighed easily a ton and were just under a meter across. They were falling down from a height of 3800 meters, so they naturally had an unbelievable amount of kinetic energy.

With an explosive noise, snow and bits of ice were blown up into the air and poured down into the cracks like an avalanche. Quenser had been holding on tight, but his hands still almost slipped from the edge of the crack. However, he could no longer feel anything at his feet. The shock of impact had widened the cracks and the ground he had been standing on had disappeared. The very bedrock of Antarctica had split like broken glass.

“Shit!! Whether they’re from an enemy or an ally, Object cannons are insane!! You could probably see this crater from a satellite!” spat out Heivia as he desperately got his legs up on the edge of the crack and crawled out. “Hey, Quenser. I don’t like what your request did! Honestly, I can only hope the shockwave was enough to knock over those-…”

He suddenly trailed off.

He had seen it.

Giant shells that weighed in the tons had rained down from high altitude. The shells had cracked the bedrock of Antarctica, a great shockwave had blown out, and an avalanche had even occurred on the distant mountain.

However, the 50 cannons had not been directly hit.

They were covered in quite a bit of snow and pieces of ice, but it did not seem enough to keep them from functioning.

“Dammit!!”

Heivia’s throat dried up. Crawling up from the crack would result in nothing but getting them blown to pieces. However, they could not hide within the crack because the bombardment had widened it and turned the ground within into a cliff.

Quenser then climbed out from the crack and shouted, “Just climb up!!”

“Do you have any idea what you’re saying!?”

“If you don’t, you’ll die!!”

Quenser climbed fully above ground as he shouted what sounded like nonsense. He then used his radio to tell his other allies the same thing. Heivia was unsure what to do, but the wall of the crack that had become a cliff had no protrusions to put his feet on. If he lost strength in his fingers, he would certainly die. He decided to crawl up before he lost the upper body strength to do so and climbed up to the surface half out of desperation.

Of course, the countless railguns then targeted them.

They were not something a flesh and blood human could avoid.

“Shit!!”

Knowing it was useless, Heivia brought up his rifle.

But then Quenser said, “It’s okay.”

Heivia wanted to reply, “How is this even slightly okay?”, but the enemy made their move first.

The tremendous sound of the railguns being fired struck Heivia’s eardrums and squeezed at his heart.

A single shot from one of those could bend an Aegis ship in two.

Heivia almost squeezed his eyes shut, but the result came even before that reflex could kick in.

“…Hah?”

Heivia stared blankly at the scene before him.

He had indeed felt pain.

However, that had merely been from the shockwave. If a shell had hit him, he would have died instantly.

The railguns fired in their direction had not hit them. Instead, they had flown off in a completely different direction. And that was not all. Some of the cannons had lost to the recoil and rolled backwards, others had fallen over, and some had even launched backwards like rockets. The collection of railguns had collapsed like

an incomplete layout of dominos.

Heivia's head was filled with questions.

"Wh-what? What just happened?"

"I made sure the anchors stabbed into the ground to support the railguns aren't working anymore."

"?"

"Specifically, it was the bedrock itself that was destroyed rather than the anchors." Quenser got up from his lying down position. "The railguns and lasers used for Objects are designed to be installed on those 200,000 ton bodies. When they're fired, the shockwave and radiant heat is scattered about. They aren't used to directly defend bases because, with them, allied attacks are just as dangerous as enemy attacks."

"What does that have to do with this?"

"When placed on the ground, the power of these things is so great that the shockwave will knock over the railgun itself. They had to have planted anchors that go over 10 meters down into the ground to ensure they don't collapse. But…"

"The princess's bombardment broke the bedrock itself…"

"The anchors are no longer functioning. The first shot didn't hit either because it caused the cannons to tilt. After that, it was like having a child shoot a magnum one-handed. They took themselves out. While avoiding the line of fire of the collapsed cannons, we need to go sever that power cable. Some of them might still be functioning."

"Then we just have to find the people who were controlling them."

"I think I have an idea regarding that."

Quenser used his chin to point toward the Legitimacy Kingdom unmanned observatory where things were getting rather lively. Apparently, the enemy had been remotely controlling the cannons while taking advantage of the heat there. Their last resort had now been utterly destroyed, so they were naturally panicking.

"Let's find a better position before they start returning fire," said

Quenser as he tapped Heivia on the shoulder. “Once a real firefight breaks out, I won’t be of any use, so you take the lead, Heivia.”

Part 7

After silencing the countless cannons, Quenser and Heivia joined with the other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. They had lost fewer allies than they had expected.

And the flow of battle afterwards was as clear as day.

The terrorists in the unmanned observatory were eliminated without much trouble. It seemed the anti-tank position using the spare Object cannons had been their primary focus and they had not given much thought to the possibility of an enemy making it past them. The terrorists were low in number, so they had little chance of winning in a straight fight. That may have been why they had relied so heavily on the remotely controlled cannons.

They also found the missile launcher thought to have targeted the Legitimacy Kingdom survey plane. The launcher itself was located atop an armored vehicle. Eight missiles were loaded atop a swiveling turret. Four firing tubes created a set and two such sets were lined up next to each other.

The missile launcher itself used a laser sight, but a separate specialized radar vehicle had been prepared. However, the angle at which the radar vehicle was set was odd. Most likely, the anti-aircraft setting had been forcibly altered to search for Quenser and the others on the ground.

“We ended up killing them all, so we still don’t know what they were after. I can already see Froleytia’s displeased expression,” said Heivia in annoyance.

In a situation where great damage could occur to either enemy or ally, capturing the enemy alive was exceedingly difficult. If the enemy soldiers managed to make preparations while they waited around, they would be in trouble. As such, Heivia and the others used their firearms to their fullest and ended up killing every single one of the enemy soldiers.

“Now we don’t even know if this was all of them or if there are more hiding somewhere else. Are we going to end up shivering in the cold as we search this white continent even though we won?”

“Mount Erebus is an active volcano, so this area seems to be warm like the area we disembarked at.”

Quenser pointed down at their feet. Instead of the white of snow and ice was hard, black rock.

Heivia looked at the white steam rising from the rock and said, “Dammit. This is no situation to be searching in. No matter how hard we work, our pay is the same. We took out the terrorist’s scouts and silenced their anti-tank position. Wouldn’t you say we’ve already done more than our fair share of work? It would be rude to steal the rest of the credit from the others.”

“What, you’re giving up already? Froleytia will give you an earful.”

“Look down, Quenser. That’s a hot spring. And it’s at a perfect 40 degrees. I’m not about to leap in naked, but I don’t see what’s wrong with taking off my boots and socks and soaking my feet.”

“Y’know, I don’t want to search through this white continent any more than you do. This has nothing to do with studying Object designs.”

The Legitimacy Kingdom forces were searching the area around the unmanned observatory. The existence of an Object that was powering the anti-tank position was still a mystery, but those two idiots no longer cared. They stuck their feet in the pool of hot water that was about a meter across and 30 cm deep, sat on the rock, and let a completely laidback mood overcome them.

“By the way, why did the terrorists use a surface-to-air missile?”

“Ahn? What do you mean?”

“They were using all those spare Object weapons, right? Couldn’t they have used them to shoot down the plane? And if they really have an Object that was powering those spares…”

“How should I know? They used that anti-tank position as a surprise attack, so maybe they purposefully used a worse weapon to keep us from knowing about their better weapons.”

“And how is this supposed Object not showing up on the princess’s radar? Objects are 50 meter monsters. It would be difficult to hide one.”

“Hey, Quenser. I highly doubt it, but we don’t have some Stealth Object on our hands here, do we?”

“Wow, that would suck. But how much would it cost to add advanced stealth functionality to something that big? And on top of the development costs, they would have to spend money like water on the maintenance.”

“Well, you’d have to ask the enemy about all that. All these 2nd generation designs just go to the extreme in some way or another. Of course, that’s only if this Stealth Object actually exists.”

They could not ask the enemy and they did not even know what the terrorists’ objective had been. What had they come to Antarctica to do?

“Well, that isn’t our job. Our huge-breasted commander can worry about that kind of thing,” said Heivia offhandedly. His entire body was relaxed as he absorbed the heat of the water through his soaking feet and the heat of the steam through the rest of his body. “Dahh…This feels so good that I’m about to fall asleep…”

“Hey, please let me tell you you’ll die if you fall asleep. I’ve been wanting to.”

Quenser did not intend to keep thinking about things unrelated to Object designs either. He turned his head around as he enjoyed the heat of the water on his feet.

And then he noticed a silver mass.

“?”

Quenser stopped moving and looked back that way again.

It was in the middle of the blizzard blowing in the crosswind. About 50 meters away was a rock about as tall as a person. Some large mass was half-hidden behind it. It seemed to be in the spot that protected it from the blizzard the best.

“Oh, I wish I hadn’t spotted that.”

“Why are you finding things, you idiot!? Now we have to actually do some work!!”

“I wish all the trouble was occurring on the opposite side of the globe.”

“We’re in Antarctica, so the opposite side of the globe would actually put the safe country in danger.”

Utterly annoyed at the turn of events, Quenser and Heivia pulled their feet from the hot water, and properly wiped the moisture from them before putting on their socks and boots.

“Hey, Quenser. There’s quite a bit of what looks like white steam rising from the other side. Is this really okay?”

“If we deal with this problem, we can get back to relaxing all the sooner. Think of it like that to work up some motivation.”

They muttered to each other as they headed for the large mass behind the rock.

It was a square box about 80 cm across.

…Or so it looked at first. It actually had crab-like mechanical legs attached to either side. It was a robot. Upon closer inspection, cameras and sensors could be seen attached to the top of the box. The metal cover had been removed and a waterproofed laptop was attached by cable.

Heivia frowned.

“What is this?”

“An observation robot. I remember making one of these back in my safe country school to learn about the fundamental structure of Objects or something like that,” said Quenser with great interest as he approached it and viewed it from various angles. “It looks like a robot used to get information from areas like the crater of an active volcano that a human can’t go to.”

“Developing UAVs and unmanned weapons has gotten pretty popular even in the military, but would they really leave their survey work to a handmade robot like this?”

“What’s needed for something like this is a lot less than the robots

sent to Mars. Also, it's easier to make a robot to enter a high temperature volcanic crater than a suit to do the same," readily replied Quenser. "Since it also has to withstand the cold of Antarctica, it must be designed for both extremes. It has a parabolic antenna, so it's probably radio controlled and sends the data it receives back to a laboratory or research boat via satellite."

"I see. But that isn't what bothered me." Heivia circled around behind the robot and pointed at a certain spot. "The cover has been removed and a strange computer is attached by a cable."

"Hm, it does have proper external connecters. I don't see why the person who put together the robot would go out of their way to remove the cover to connect a computer."

"Does that mean someone other than its designer forcibly connected it?"

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance.

This may have been the terrorist's objective.

"Hey, Quenser. Can you tell anything from the computer's display?"

"Should we even be touching it?"

"What, do you want to ask Froleytia what to do? I don't want to be like a newlywed wife attending a cooking class. Y'know, the ones that call the teacher over even if they're just putting some oil in the frying pan."

"Well, if anything goes wrong, you'll be the one getting the lecture, Heivia."

"Fine, fine. Dammit, Quenser. Are we a young wife who doesn't even know how to put on an apron?"

With how quickly his response came, Heivia must have truly been afraid of that commander.

Quenser set the frequency on his radio and concisely explained the situation regarding the Antarctic probe robot and the laptop.

Froleytia's answer was clear.

"I'll send the staff from the electronic simulation division there. Don't touch anything until they arrive."

“Keh. So once again, our achievement is being taken by someone else,” said Heivia with a displeased look.

However, from his complaining not too long before, it was possible he was upset about having to wait around in the middle of Antarctica rather than about their “achievement”.

As Heivia emitted an aura of wanting to hurry up and leave, Froleytia spoke in a light tone lacking any worry.

“Oh, did you not think that some empty space in the robot could have been filled with plastic explosives? If you make a mistake, it could explode.”

“I want to leave!! I want to leave right now!!” shouted Heivia with tears in his eyes, but Froleytia indifferently ordered them to stay and ended the transmission.

Quenser and Heivia were left to nervously stare at the robot.

They both naturally distanced themselves from it bit by bit.

But…

“…Huh?”

“Hey, is it just me, or did it just start doing something?”

The two of them suddenly stopped moving.

Their eyes moved toward the laptop connected to the robot.

Specifically, to its screen.

New windows had started to appear at an alarming rate.

Heivia’s desire to flee was growing by the second.

“Did this just get very, very bad?”

“This goes beyond bad…”

Quenser was following the lines of text in the windows with a serious expression on his face. Unlike Heivia, he rushed over to the waterproofed laptop. He frantically brought his fingers to the keyboard.

He opened various windows himself and checked what they said.

“This probe robot is controlled from a remote laboratory via satellite and its data is sent back via the same route. It looks like something is interfering with the communications line that goes through the satellite.”

“You mean they’re stealing classified data through here?”

“No, not that! Shit!!” Quenser suddenly shouted as he stared at the windows. “They’re after the satellite!! The satellite it uses for communications is also equipped with various devices used for experiments in space. One of those experiments involves burning the surfaces of nearby asteroids with a laser and analyzing the data taken of the light emitted. The entire system for that experiment has been taken over!!”

“Sorry, Quenser, but you’re going to need to explain that in a way I can understand.”

“Simply put, they’ve hacked in so they can freely target whatever they want with an experimental laser!! It’s powerful enough to burn through a 30 mm metal plate!!”

“Wait, wait, wait!! They can do that? I thought satellite’s had strict security!!”

“They can. This isn’t a satellite made for national projects that was built using a massive budget. This is a small, cheap satellite made with personal funds at a university. The system it uses is only a slightly improved version of a commercial OS with some freeware added on. And that goes for the security as well!!”

“But this is a laser that burns the surface of asteroids in space. Even if it targets the earth, wouldn’t the atmosphere attenuate it and the ozone layer refract it before it reached a building or the surface?”

“Yes, but only if its target is the earth,” said Quenser as he pointed at the screen. “The terrorists are targeting an area on the moon’s surface filled with a special grade of villas.”

“The moon!?” shouted Heivia in a hysterical voice.

Quenser pointed at the data on the satellite laser’s targeting angle displayed on the monitor. It was clearly in the opposite direction of the earth’s atmosphere. It was targeting a different celestial body.

“The moon…? You shouldn’t joke like that, Quenser. This is a good opportunity to tell you there are some things you really shouldn’t joke about.”

“Stop denying reality! The satellite laser really is targeting the moon right this instant!! Specifically, it’s targeting the Blind Net set up as a terraforming experiment on the moon’s surface!!”

“? The Blind Net? That’s the thing known as an optical second atmosphere, right? They make two ridiculously huge hemisphere-shaped net-like structures out of semitransparent wires made of variable photonic crystal, one larger than the other, and use them to freely regulate the amount of sunlight that reaches the surface, right? I remember hearing a rumor that it would be used in the ReTerra Project to combat global warming.”

“The moon does not have a thick atmosphere like the earth, so there is no protection from the effects of sunlight! In a single day, it varies from freezing temperatures of dozens of degrees below zero to blazing temperatures of a few hundred degrees!! Do you have any idea what will happen if the terrorists use the laser to destroy the Blind Net!?”

Humanity had continued its development of the moon, but it still did not have an atmosphere like the earth’s. The villas were solid buildings surrounded by thick walls. Even so, the buildings had been built on the assumption that the Blind Net would be protecting them. They were not made to withstand the extreme extraterrestrial environment.

“Without the Blind Net, the buildings will receive those extreme variations in temperature. Who knows what this will do to those villas! And even a crack of a few millimeters is enough to leave the people inside to a death in the hell of a vacuum!!”

The radiation coming from the sun was another problem. The giant net-like Blind Net also polarized the radiation pouring down on the moon’s surface.

Sounding fed up with it all, Heivia shouted, “What the hell!? This the first large-scale attack on the moon in the history of mankind, isn’t it!? I think that has more to do with no one ever thinking about doing it than us not having a way, though!!”

“The plan is underway as we speak. We need to do something about the satellite and quickly!!”

The terrorists that had been in the unmanned observatory may have been planning to buy enough time for the attack on the moon to end before they fled. It had not been found yet, but there may have been a boat hidden somewhere which would have allowed them to get away.

“Not good!! From the orbit of the satellite, the direction the moon is facing, and their position related to the sun, we can tell about where the hole is going to be opened up. If we don’t get the celebs in that general area to evacuate, this will leave a really bad taste in my mouth!!”

“On our authority!? Can you give orders to people rich enough to have villas on the moon!?”

“Oh, I know. When in doubt, contact your commander. We need to get Froleytia’s help!!”

Quenser and Heivia went to their radio for further instructions.

Froleytia responded with a voice filled anger that seemed to blaze hotter than the flames of hell.

“I thought I told you not to touch anything until the electronic simulation division arrived…”

“Yeah, sorry about that. But this is hardly the time!!”

“You have guts to give an order of precedence to your commander’s orders, Quenser. But…villas on the moon, you say?”

Her tone was meditative, but a hint of impatience could be heard mixed in.

“Wait just a second,” Froleytia said and ended the transmission.

After a few minutes, she contacted them again and calm had returned to her voice. She may have had the electronic simulation division make some predictions for her.

“I’ll start with the conclusion: we don’t need to worry about the satellite. We have estimated the target of the laser, but the general area targeted by the hole in the Blind Net is called Rock Castle. An interesting VIP happens to be there.”

“?”

“A major general of the Capitalist Corporations, one of the world powers on par with the Legitimacy Kingdom. The Legitimacy Kingdom has tried to assassinate him a few times, but failed. If the terrorists are going to kill him, that actually solves a problem for us. The higher ups are of the opinion that we should let them do this. I agree. If the alternative is to have my subordinates killed on an assassination mission, I would rather turn a blind eye here.”

“…”

“…”

Quenser and Heivia exchanged a glance. They began to feel foolish for having been so worried before. It would of course have been bad had there been Capitalist Corporations civilians in the villa, but they had no obligation to save the life of someone who gave orders to kill people and watched on from above.

“Anyway, you do not need to do anything regarding the satellite. You did touch the computer connected to the probe robot, though. Well, we can send it to the intelligence department afterwards and have them make it look like it naturally failed due to the extreme environment, so that won’t be a problem. If you understand, head back immediately.”

Having said that, Froleytia ended the transmission.

Heivia limply sat down on top of the ice.

“Sigh… I feel like all my energy is gone all of a sudden. What were we fighting for this whole time? How are the ones who fell prey to that anti-tank position supposed to rest in peace now?”

“…”

Quenser gave no response to Heivia’s offhand comment.

He seemed to be thinking about something.

“Hey? C’mon, let’s get going. Or are you still worried about what happened to that baby penguin from before?”

“Heivia, can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“Before we came to Antarctica, you had that video chat in the

maintenance base's ammunition storage, right? Y'know, the one with that blonde girl in a dress from the Legitimacy Kingdom's something-or-other family." Quenser chose his words carefully as he spoke. "Do you remember when she said where she was going? Something about the place farthest in the world from this planet's wars, right?"

"…Wait a second. Wait just a second!"

"I think she also mentioned the colors of national flags being irrelevant. That means it has to be somewhere outside the boundaries of any of the world powers."

There were of course a few general areas that could be.

For example, international waters, the area 200 nautical miles from land. Or Antarctica where Quenser and Heivia currently were. There were a few different paradises that belonged to no one, but one of those was…

"H-Heivia. We don't know this for sure. In fact, odds are good we're worrying over nothing here, but can you at least contact her over the internet?"

"Y-yes. We have no proof. Wait, can we even use the internet here?"

Due to the flood of research stations from different world powers, the internet was surprisingly easy to come by on Antarctica and the Legitimacy Kingdom had the assault landing aircraft carrier waiting in the ocean.

Heivia pulled out his handheld device and switched on the wireless LAN.

"Quenser, we're cut off from external access during missions, but can you hack your way through that?"

"If I could do that, I wouldn't be here as a battlefield student. But the special access for that girl might still be active. If it is, you might at least be able to connect to her."

"Oh! It worked, it worked! But I have a feeling it's only a matter of time before Froleytia notices and gets really pissed!!"

After some simple operations, Heivia had connected to a familiar

girl who was in an unknown location.

His first question was, “Where are you right now?”

It was a simple question and it received a simple reply.

“That should be obvious. I am in a villa on the moon named Rock Castle.”

Immediately afterwards, the son of the Legitimacy Kingdom's well-known noble Winchell family, Heivia, let out a yell with the veins in his temple bulging out.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuccccccccccccccccccckkkkkkkkkkkkk!!"

"Th-that is quite the straightforward proposal! I-I do not particularly mind such proposals however," said the girl.

Quenser almost cried out, "You don't mind!?", but he stopped himself at the last second because he did not want to anger the daughter of a noble family.

Heivia and Quenser started a whispered emergency strategy meeting so the young lady could not hear.

"(So what is going on, Quenser? Do the higher ups want to kill this Capitalist Corporations major general badly enough to kill the only daughter of a noble family in the process!?)"

"(If her family is influential and does not view the Capitalist Corporations as an enemy even while we are at war with them, some of the military higher ups may want to get rid of them. But I doubt Froleytia knows there are civilians there. If she did, she would not have given the order so calmly.)"

"(Either way, the result is the same. With a military order, we cannot mess with the satellite without being penalized. But if we do nothing…!!)"

"What are you two whispering about?"

Her voice made them both jump.

Quenser jabbed Heivia in the arm with his elbow.

"(Heivia. Hey, Heivia.)"

"(What is it!? This is kind of an emergency!!)"

"(We can say your hand slipped. Do it, do it!!)"

"Bfh!?" Heivia spat out in shock. "(Do you have any idea what you're saying!? If we did that, you would be penalized along with me!)"

"(Hurry! The laser will fire in another 30 seconds!!)"

“(Fine, I’ll do it!! But I don’t want to hear you complaining afterwards!!)”

Heivia took a deep breath to focus himself and then turned toward the laptop connected to the probe robot.

“Whoops! My hand slipped!!”

“Heivia, you idiot! That’s the wrong way!!”

As they shouted at each other, they both turned toward the computer and desperately altered the satellite’s orbit.

“Just what have you two been doing? It is rather disturbing.”

“We’re playing the role of hero together!! And preparing ourselves for a rather unexciting danger to our lives to come!!”

Part 8

It went well beyond the level of whether she was mad or not.

Quenser and Heivia had been called to the officer’s room in the assault landing aircraft carrier being used as a sea headquarters. What they found waiting for them there was Froleytia’s raging lecture special. It was exactly what they expected, but on a much greater scale. Quenser could not help but wonder when the Japanese shuriken decorating her desk would come flying his way.

After the long, long string of abuse had ended, over 120 minutes had passed. Froleytia herself must have realized how long she had been speaking because she took a cough drop before speaking again.

“Well, you are lucky this was an unofficial additional mission. Since this operation was never supposed to exist in the first place, they cannot publicly make you take responsibility. Otherwise, you would be behind bars right now.”

“Sigh… Yeah…”

"…Dammit. I fight to save the heroine, and all I get is a lecture."

Quenser and Heivia's faces looked like the plastic bag after all the cream had been squeezed from it.

With the cough drop melting on her tongue, Froleytia asked, "So how did the lady in question react?"

"You should ask Heivia about that, not me."

Quenser passed the question along to Heivia. Heivia looked uncomfortable, but he had to answer without averting his gaze since his commanding officer had asked the question.

"She seemed really happy."

"I see."

Froleytia's expression had been one of anger for the past two hours, but now it changed.

With a bitter smile, the two boys' commander said, "Then I guess I do not need to ask anything else."

Part 9

With his job complete, Heivia left Froleytia's officer room and parted ways with Quenser. That constant companion of his was a student after all. He had not undergone the training of a soldier, so he was too tired to do anything else after moving around at the same pace as Heivia.

Also, Heivia wanted to be alone for a bit.

The bedrooms were four to a room, so he could not head there. In the end, he opened a hatch on the ship sailing near Antarctica and stepped out onto the cold deck.

He used his handheld device to begin a video chat over the internet.

He was calling the daughter of the Vanderbilt family who was on that moon villa.

Froleytia surely knew that special access was still valid by that point. That she had not yet ended it may have been her way of showing discretion.

Most likely, the special access would end after this final call.

That was why he was going to say everything he wanted to while he could.

“Have you calmed down a bit now?” he asked.

“Y-yes. You cannot blame me though. Anyone would have panicked if they heard the villa on the moon they are in is being targeted by terrorists.”

“Perhaps,” said Heivia with a bitter smile.

He had once again ended up distancing himself from the valiant deeds he needed to inherit his family. However, Heivia did not regret it. If he had lost her there, those deeds would have been meaningless.

“Why?” the girl suddenly asked. “I understand that inheriting the Winchell family is no ordinary matter. Even more so given the fact that the others in your family have reason to shun you. But still…”

“Are you saying the things I am doing are too dangerous?”

“Today, I saw a glimpse of what you are doing. I thought the right to your inheritance would come after three years spent in a safe base, but this is completely different. If you keep doing things like this, something bad will eventually happen. And…if you gave up on you-know-what, you could inherit the Winchell family at any time without having to deal with all this. So…why?”

The others in your family have reason to shun you.

If you gave up on you-know-what…

Hearing that, Heivia narrowed his eyes slightly. The look on his face was more serious than any he had ever let Quenser, Froleytia, or the Baby Magnum princess see.

“Listen. My Winchell family and your Vanderbilt family are so hostile to each other that they wish for each other to be destroyed. You understand that, right?”

“Y-yes…”

“Yet neither you nor I wish to be pushed around by that ridiculous feud. You still feel that way, right?”

“Yes. But…but…!!”

“That is all I need to know.” Heivia smiled. “At this rate, we’ll end up like something from a Shakespearian tragedy. However, I have no intention of letting things end like that. I will continue struggling until I have snatched the right to inherit my family from those who would take it from me. Once I do, I can silence everyone in my family and bring an end to this ridiculous feud.”

“…”

“So you wait there. I will make sure I have the right to what is mine. Why do you think I refused to go to a military academy and resigned myself to start as a private first class? It was so I could do what I must do.”

Heivia Winchell.

As he spoke of his goals through that video chat, he made one more silent decision that he neither spoke nor let show on his face.

…And I will even fight Objects to accomplish this if necessary.

Part 10

The princess, the pilot elite of the Baby Magnum Object, stared at one of the monitors in the cockpit.

She was in the Ross Sea just off the coast near Mount Erebus, which had been a battlefield not too long ago.

A few motorboats were stopped there. They likely belonged to the terrorists. They may have been planning to use them to escape to Oceania or wherever once the attack on the moon using the probe robot was over.

However, that was not the issue.

On the ocean surface right next to the motorboats was a bundle of a few dozen thick power cables. They were the ones used to power the spare Object cannons used in the anti-tank position.

Normally, they would be connected to an Object, but there was no sign of one.

The princess checked her Object's radar, but she could not find anything large enough to be one.

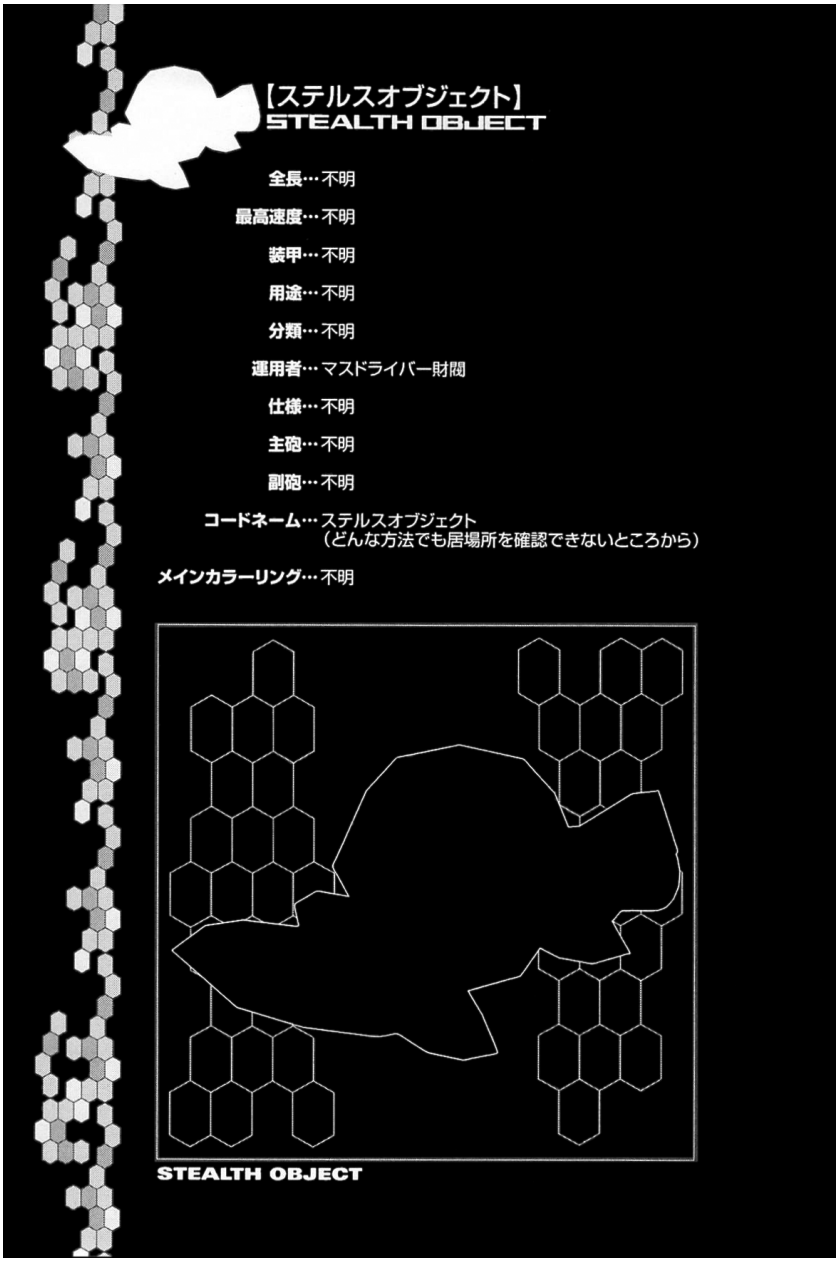
She thought for a bit and then gave a frank report.

She was speaking to Froleytia who had command of the area.

"As expected, I could not find the reactor used. It is unknown how it was transported in secret. It is possible it was an Object that can dive underwater."

"I would think a 50 meter spherical mass under the water would cause enough of a disturbance in the currents to pick up on sonar."

"Then it may have stealth functionality."



“I have a feeling something that large would be visible with the naked eye even if it did not show up on radar. Well, if we couldn’t find it, we couldn’t find it. And we have a good lead as to who these terrorists were from a different route.”

“?”

“From those railguns used in that anti-tank position, from the low

resistance cables used to power them, and from the surface-to-air missile unit that locked onto the survey plane. All the enemy soldiers may be dead, but there are several things leftover that can provide hints. From what those show us, the power behind this is likely…”

Froleytia trailed off.

It may have been because she had no real proof.

Or perhaps she did but was still reluctant to say it.

Whatever the reason, she finally finished.

“The Mass Driver conglomerate, an extremely large organization within the world power of the Capitalist Corporations.”

Chapter 2: A Three Legged Race Up a Mountain is a Matter of Life and Death > > Battle of Shells in the Iguazu Mountains

Part 1

In the Atlantic Ocean near the Falkland Islands, the almost 60 year old captain of the assault landing aircraft carrier Charlemagne slowly walked across the ship's flat deck that was used as a runway. Alongside him was Froleytia, a girl of only 18. The 170 meter long deck was a bit short to use as a walking course.

"I suppose this is just the flow of time," said the white-haired captain with a smile as he used one hand to hold a short and fat pipe of the type preferred by Western detectives. "Once, large aircraft carriers were designed to carry 70-80 aircrafts, but there were few opportunities to fully use all of them in actual battle. With the invention of ultra high speed torpedoes and stealth mines, the sinking of aircraft carriers was no longer an empty dream. …The cost and risk of having things aboard one became an issue."

"So they stopped focusing all the personnel and equipment in one place and distributed it about to reduce the risk of loss?" replied Froleytia.

In her mouth was a long, narrow Japanese kiseru that stood in contrast to the captain's pipe.

The captain slowly nodded and said, "If 10 aircrafts could be held aboard a single ship, that was good enough. If you needed more than that, you just had to bring in enough ships. The length of the runway for landing was the primary problem with making smaller aircraft carriers, but the development of high precision sensors and reverse firing nozzles for braking made that less of an issue. And something else changed what our missions entailed even more. … Yes, the arrival of those Objects."

A heavy metallic noise reverberated through the area.

Two assault landing aircraft carriers were lined up with a space of over 50 meters between them. In the middle was that giant weapon that had around 100 cannons on a spherical body. It was the Baby Magnum. Scaffolding and countless wires were strung up around that Object that was the pride of the Legitimacy Kingdom.

The captain looked up at its giant body and said, “With the development of laser technology, the role of air supremacy moved to them. Our primary mission is no longer to quickly get aircrafts to the battlefield. Instead, we resupply the Object on the sea, carry out its defense during that time, and see it off.”

That was why the ship was not merely known as an aircraft carrier. It also carried out the role of a landing craft. That ship that held all the equipment needed to create a base would approach the coast and quickly get that equipment on shore. That was the function required of aircraft carriers in the age of Objects.

Froleytia lightly nodded once more and said, “I thank you for your assistance. We aim to one day be able to quickly construct a base in all environments, but it seems we still specialize in fighting on land.”

“Think nothing of it. In fact, we prefer it this way. If you were able to quickly move over sea, there would be no place left for marines like us. I am glad to have an opportunity to mobilize the ships of our fleet.”

Having said that, the captain exhaled a bit of smoke while making sure it did not go in Froleytia’s direction.

As if to change the mood, the captain’s expression stiffened and he said, “So who is this enemy you are chasing?”

“Is it enough to say it is the Mass Driver conglomerate?”

Part 2

Quenser was about 30 meters up from the surface of the ocean.

Normally, the Baby Magnum underwent maintenance in a rectangular area created from a combination of large vehicles.

However, that could not be done on the sea. The Object was positioned between two assault landing aircraft carriers with countless wires strung up around it from either side. This created an improvised maintenance area.

Numerous cranes with retractable arms were installed on either side of the assault landing aircraft carriers. They were not focused on just one side of the ships so that it did not matter which side either ship was on and in order to maintain the ships' balance.

The scaffolding Quenser stood upon was not a solid catwalk-like passageway made of steel. Narrow steel plates were connected without gap between two wires, making it something like a narrow, metal suspension bridge. Of course, the rocking of the ships on the waves and the blowing of the sea wind caused the wires to constantly shake unstably.

"Wah wah wah wah wah!?"

With both hands, Quenser grabbed the thick wires that were in place of a railing as his upper body swayed back and forth like a beginner skateboarder. Meanwhile, the maintenance soldier old lady folded her arms and snorted without holding the railing at all.

"Now how are you supposed to do any work with both your hands full? Can you at least let go with one hand? What do you think we came all the way up here for?"

"I can't! It's shaking and we're so high up! If I fall, I'm done for!!"

"It's only the ocean down below, so you won't die if you fall. Unless there's a major storm, the waves and the wind have a certain regularity to them. If you learn that regularity and control your center of gravity, your body won't even shake."

"You sure ask for some crazy things!!"

Quenser started wondering if she was an aikido master or something, but when he looked around, he saw the other maintenance soldiers welding armor plates onto the Baby Magnum or checking its radar were not using a lifeline while working with both hands. Apparently, that was a basic skill for those doing maintenance work.

"…Why does no one use a lifeline?"

“Those awkward things just make your body harder to move and slow down your work. As I said, you won’t die if you fall into the ocean. You only need a lifeline when your life is actually at risk.”

“I don’t think this is a skill I need as a designer…” muttered Quenser.

The maintenance soldier old lady frowned slightly and said, “Come to think of it, boy, have you decided on your Object research topic yet?”

“Just when I was thinking about deciding, I was thrown out into the middle of Alaska,” replied Quenser in annoyance. “There are a few genres I’m interested in, though. Like the distribution of weight and efficient means of propulsion. I just don’t know which field would bring me closest to being a designer the fastest.”

“You went out of your way to leave your safe country as a battlefield student and now you’re choosing your field of specialty on what will be the fastest? …You really are trying to take the easy path through life, aren’t you?”

“I would prefer if you called it ‘efficient planning’.”

At that point, the siren warning that a crane arm was moving began blaring. Quenser and the old lady lowered their heads as if shrugging and the item hanging down from the arm passed a few meters above their heads.

Seeing it, Quenser looked puzzled.

“What is that?”

“A small refrigerator. A microwave oven is scheduled to be brought aboard as well.”

“Where are they going? And why???”

“Sailing the seven seas takes time. For example, cutting across the Pacific Ocean takes half a day. It has been suggested for a while now that they be bolted in the cockpit to ensure the Elite has efficient access to food to maintain her focus.”

“I see. So that’s what the microwave oven is-…”

Just as Quenser started to understand, he raised his head in

realization.

The flavorless rations he was issued that looked like giant erasers did not need to be stored in a refrigerator and they did not need to be heated in a microwave oven. That meant…

“N-no fair!! The princess gets gratin, Salisbury steak, fried chicken, and other delicious foods!?”

“It is perfectly fair. Her focus can completely change the course of a battle, so it is only natural to prepare this sort of thing. The rations have no flavor because no one flavor will ever be liked by everyone. By having something that no one likes or hates, morale can be kept even across all the soldiers. However, the princess’s personal food can easily be matched to her personal tastes.”

“But the princess alone gets to heat fried chicken in the microwave and gets to eat fried chicken whenever and wherever she wants! And fried chicken!!”

“…Okay, I get that you really want to eat chicken, so just calm down.”

Part 3

Heivia looked over at the small fighters lined up neatly on one end of the assault landing aircraft carrier’s deck. They were 3 or 4 meters tall, so he had to look up a bit.

“Look at these overloaded delta wings, Quenser. There’s nothing but special antennae for jamming. They have more of them than they have missiles.”

“Of course they do. If an Object gets a lock on them, it’s all over. It’ll just shoot them down with a laser that can fire anywhere in the sky at the speed of light. It’s only natural to focus on ways of not getting locked onto and just barely escaping if you are locked onto. They would still have poor odds of surviving if they seriously took one on, though.”

Heivia nodded offhandedly.

“There was a time when everything was all about stealth, but when multiple radar facilities have been set up, the radar signal you scatter in the opposite direction from your target is picked up by a different base, revealing your location.”

“Yes, the focus changed from flying such that you weren’t found to flying such that you couldn’t be hit,” said Quenser with little interest. He then changed the subject. “It seems Froleytia has been spending more time than usual putting together this strategy, but what exactly is this Mass Driver conglomerate?”

“As the name suggests, it’s a group with the world’s greatest mass driver construction technology. There are plenty of organizations talking about developing mass drivers and not just in the Capitalist Corporations, but apparently that conglomerate is the only one able to actually build a functioning one.”

“So it’s a collection of space nuts? Are they really that dangerous?”

“They are politically. The reasons are complex,” came the response, but not from Heivia. It was the fried chicken-hoarding princess.

(But where is she?)

Quenser was confused, but then he spotted the girl sunbathing face down on a bath towel laid out on the deck at his feet. The princess wore her special blue suit and seemed very relaxed.

Heivia shrugged and said, “In the Capitalist Corporations, money is everything. Those with money have a higher standing in society and those who do not have a lower standing. Even your priority in receiving civil liberties is determined by the size of your bank account.”

“Naturally, the leaders that control the military have lots of money,” added the princess.

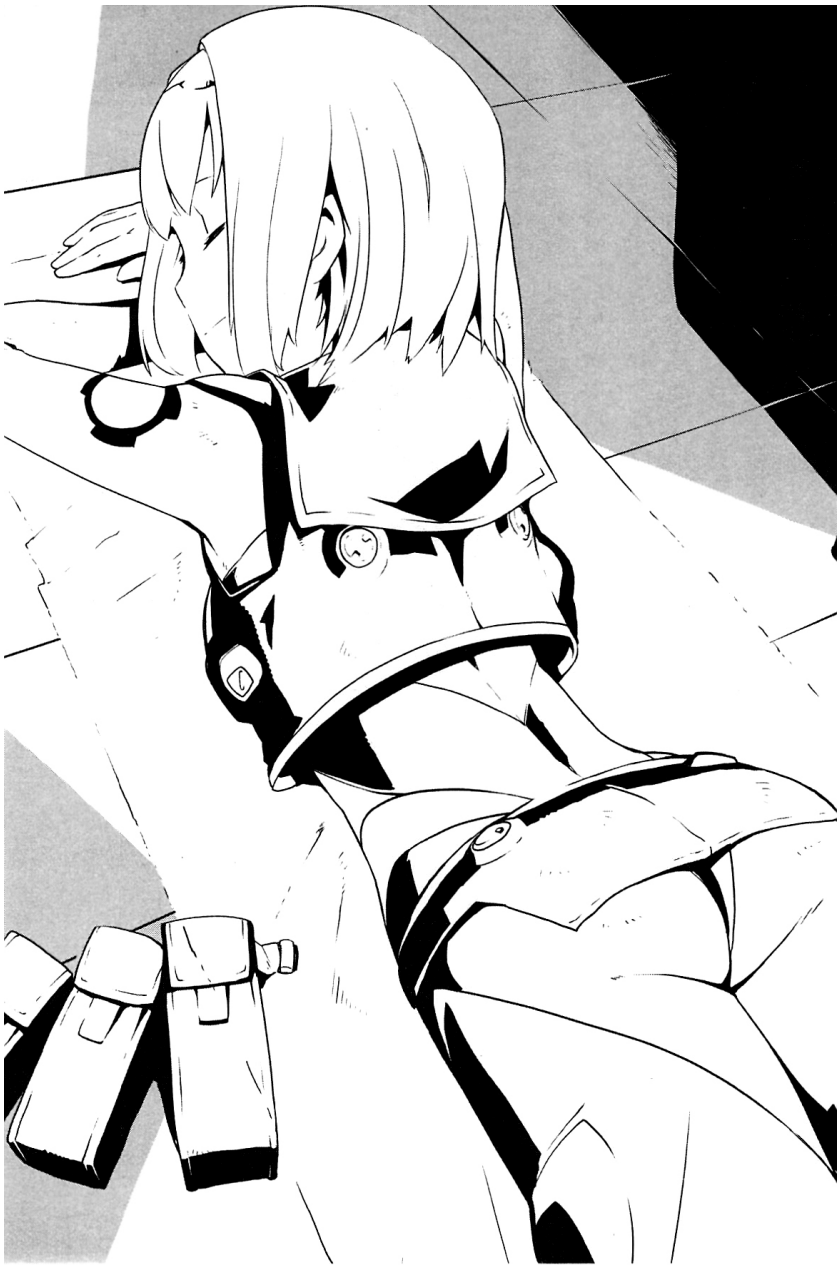
“It used to simply be that the large companies controlled everything, but lately that seems to have changed. Basically, you just have to have a lot of money. There are now temporary groups that bring in investors who struck it rich with day trading or lawyers that work for multiple corporations. …I believe the Mass Driver conglomerate has its own territory and residents. So of course they had a military force in the name of protecting them.”

“Which means…” Quenser looked confused. “This Mass Driver

conglomerate is a part of this new generation?”

“It was originally a group that mainly worked in the rate business.”

“?”



“There are commodities that’s values change daily like stocks and the foreign exchange, right? Well, that term refers to dealing in

those things in order to make a profit from the changes in price. While stocks and currency are the representative examples, it is also done with energy related commodities like oil and coal, with jewels and precious metals like gold, and even historical works of art and antiques. That's the Capitalist Corporations for you," said Heivia offhandedly. "This conglomerate sent the massive fortunes it made this way to companies it felt had potential and began researching and developing the technologies needed for mass drivers. If that was adopted as the officially used method, they could monopolize the space traffic network. Their ultimate goal was probably to control a permanent source of profits rather than the more unstable rate business where profits were constantly in flux."

The idea was a purely business one. It was completely cut off from any sense of hopes or dreams. It seemed the people of the Capitalist Corporations really did think of nothing but wealth no matter what.

"By the way, a mass driver is something like a giant railgun pointed straight up. It fires a shuttle or container into satellite orbit. It is simpler than using a space shuttle," added the princess.

However, Quenser was not very focused on what she was saying. As she lay face down, she would occasionally fidget and wiggle her butt. Of course, he would likely end up being shot with an Object's main cannon if he told her that was what he was focused on.

"So why is this rich Mass Driver conglomerate our enemy?"

"Quenser, you need to pick up a newspaper sometime. The Mass Driver conglomerate seceded from the Capitalist Corporations recently. They even took their territory and residents with them. It was closer to a coup d'etat than a defection. After all, money is everything in the Capitalist Corporations. As long as they have the money for it, they can buy military might. …They might even have an Object prepared."

"Currently, they are going through a large migration to prevent the Capitalist Corporations government from forfeiting their assets," said the princess as she held her feet up in the air and kicked them around.

Heivia continued, "I heard that just before the Mass Driver conglomerate began this large migration, Capitalist Corporation military intelligence succeeded in securing all of their Elites, which avoided becoming a war between multiple Objects; Without an

Elite, an Object is useless."

"That sounds like a mission we'd get stuck with," commented Quenser.

"But the rumor is that the conglomerate might actually have an Elite they prepared in secret. If that's true, they really are planning to make a war of this. The mere fact that they are making this great migration of their territory and residents shows they're prepared for something big if you ask me."

Quenser looked confused and asked, "But why? Even if they have an Object or two in secret, how is the Mass Driver conglomerate supposed to defeat a world power like the Legitimacy Kingdom or Capitalist Corporations?"

"It's all thanks to a simple adoption war," said Heivia as he rubbed the bottom of the small fighter with his palm. "The shuttles that used rocket engines back a long time ago were simply too expensive for large scale space development, so about 20 years ago, new methods began to be considered. In the end, two suggestions remained. One was the mass driver that used railgun technology and the other was the laser space elevators that used laser technology."

"The Capitalist Corporations eventually chose the laser method," added the princess.

"The Mass Driver conglomerate is in a bit of a rush because they lost to the competition. While there were two methods, the laser method had a great variety of corporations and organizations working on it while that conglomerate had a complete monopoly on mass driver technology. I've never heard of anyone else creating a functional one even in the world powers outside the Capitalist Corporations. If it had been officially adopted, the mass driver might have become a worldwide format and become a fountain eternally overflowing with money for the Mass Driver conglomerate. However, its financial value is less than zero if it fails. Any organization that is in the red tens of billions of dollars over failed research will go bankrupt." Heivia shrugged and sighed. "And to add insult to injury, the laser method was chosen not because of any problems with the technology but because of the personal tastes of the higher ups. The way things were going, their organization was done for. That is why they wanted the mass driver to be adopted by another world power like the Information Alliance

or the Faith Organization, but the Capitalist Corporations told them to stop. The Capitalist Corporations of course wanted to avoid anything that would use tech developed there for the benefit of other world powers. With their focus on money, taking part in the international market like that was the same as aiding the enemy."

"So they were blocked at every turn…"

"That was when the Mass Driver conglomerate really got mad. It's unclear what their ultimate goal is, but they have hired a lot of the mercenary units that make up the Capitalist Corporations military and some have caught glimpses of an Object. It's not surprising that Froleytia wants to think carefully about our strategy here."

"I see," said Quenser." So what's this about mercenary units? Do they not have a standard army?"

"The Capitalist Corporations military is completely PMC based. Simply put, the entire army is made up of hired mercenaries. A balance is kept by having the mercenary companies control the troops including the technicians in charge of maintenance and having the companies that hire them supplying the all-important Elite."

"So they don't have complete control of the units?"

"It seems the companies possess the Objects and Elites which are the most important parts, but everyone else is called in from elsewhere. I supposed it's something like sponsored athletes in individual sports. The athlete himself belongs to the company, but the detailed coordination of things like his outfit and drinks are handled by outside workers. The company itself does not control the stadium or field used to break records, but the athlete from that company is needed for the match to begin."

"Is that how it works? But do food companies and convenience store groups have military troops?"

"If they need them, they'll buy up the right kind of heavy industry companies, join them together, and then merge with them to gain the technology needed for an Object. From what I hear, there's a custom of only viewing companies that have an Object as first rate companies. In fact, the PMCs I mentioned before are often subsidiaries of the company they work for or have an exclusive contract with them. Otherwise there would be issues with keeping things like Object designs secret. At any rate, those with huge

amounts of money can mobilize more power, so the large companies and monstrously successful investors are naturally the ones with all the power. They're something like our nobles."

"So even if they started a war against a proper army like ours, they have enough military might to actually put up a legitimate fight?"

"See why Froleytia has to take this so seriously?" said Heivia, sounding slightly bored. "The Mass Driver conglomerate has seceded from the Capitalist Corporations and started this great migration. Also, they do not wish to negotiate a truce. If they are going to fight, it is going to be with everything they have. The battle will not end until one side's Object has been blown away. I don't know what kind of mission this is going to be, but I do know it's going to be dangerous. You should carry out your preparations even more thoroughly than usual."

"Preparations, hm?" Quenser looked up at the small refrigerator hanging from a crane overhead. He continued with what that reminded him of. "Then I'd really like some fried chicken."

"Dammit, Quenser. You're not supposed to say that on the battlefield where we get nothing but flavorless rations!"

"Eh? But I want some. I want to bite into it and have the grease spread through my mouth. It would be even better with a bit of lemon seasoning."

"You idiot!! If you say that, I'm gonna want some too!! Ahh, it's too late! Now I'm craving some nice, greasy chicken!!"

The two idiots began to writhe around, but then the princess spoke up with her usual expressionless face.

"You can get some."

"Hah?"

"This is the 15th anniversary of the Charlemagne's commissioning, and they seemed to have had a lot of different foods brought in for a party. There seems to be some left over, so you can get some if you head to the mess hall."

Part 4

Quenser, Heivia, and the princess headed for the mess hall of the assault landing aircraft carrier Charlemagne. The only other person there was Froleytia who was stuffing her mouth full of a white sauce spaghetti soup.

“Look, Quenser!! As usual, our commander is taking all the good stuff for herself while we were too dutiful to check!!”

“First the deer in Alaska and now this. She certainly has quite the wonderful personality…”

“Mgh? Oh, did you catch wind of this too?”

Froleytia looked surprised, but it was no time to curry the favor of their commander. They had to find the fried chicken leftover from the party.

“I see nuggets here and kara-age here!? Dammit, so close!! I like it to be on the bone!!”

“Are you looking for fried chicken, Quenser? If you don’t mind it being a bit strong, I have three pieces left.”

“All that pepper you’ve already put on it is a point against it, but this is no time to be picky!! Yay, chicken!!”

Quenser raised his arms in the air and surrendered to Froleytia.

Heivia and the princess had leftover Salisbury steak and french fries piled high on their disposable paper plates.

The four simply sat chewing for a while, but there was no reason to sit in silent concentration the entire time just because they had not had proper food in a while. When people gathered, stupid conversations would begin. That is one of the rules of this world.

The one who began first was Heivia.

“You know pole dancing, right? Y’know, with the girl wrapped around the pole?”

“…That came out of nowhere. Heivia, are certain urges building up in you?”

“How do they do that?”

“What’s so difficult about it? They just wrap around the pole and

swing around."

"No, not that." Heivia seemed to be having difficulty figuring out how to put what he wanted to say into words. "When it's done more acrobatically, they flip upside down and have just the back of one leg wrapped around the pole while they spin around, right? How do they support their body like that?"

Quenser was about to say, "How should I know?", but someone unexpected cut in from the side.

It was their commander, Froleytia.

Having polished off the spaghetti soup, she was elegantly wiping off her mouth with a napkin as she said, "It differs depending on the person, but the friction of your skin against the brass pole is usually enough to support you. Well, there is a trick to how you wrap your leg around, but as long as you do it like you're trying to squeeze and twist around the metal pole, one leg is enough to support you."

The two idiots stared in shock at Froleytia as she stood up from her chair and glanced around the area. She spotted a pipe wrapped in fabric tape running vertically at one edge of the mess hall.

Froleytia checked the thickness and sturdiness of the pipe and said, "Basically, you do this."

"Huh!? Froleytia, why do you seem so used to doing this!?"

Quenser was in utter shock at the seductive action his commander had begun so suddenly. Froleytia replied as she spun around upside down, paying no heed to her tight skirt.

"Sometimes you need a hidden talent for the victory parties after a successful mission. Also, doing this seems to double the motivation of the troops for some reason. The only real problem is that spinning around while grabbing the pole with my leg like this tends to rip my stockings. The synthetic fibers also reduce the friction, so maybe I should start doing it barelegged."

"Y-yeah, I can see how people would get worked up if you and those huge breasts of yours were spinning around with your stockings ripping apart on your inner thighs!!" shouted Heivia in utter shock at that unexpected military tradition.

Froleytia then got down from the pole and added, "By the way, our

princess can do this too.”

“Ehh!?”

“Ehh!?”

The thought of that slender girl doing it gave them a different feeling than when it was their sexy commander. Quenser and Heivia began trembling, but all the princess herself did was munch on french fries with her small mouth. As usual, she had no interest in using her eroticism in a way only a girl could. Most likely, any guy who asked her to do that would just get a slap in the face.

As the four of them continued their stupid conversation, the topic turned to something more dangerous. In the end, they were on a battlefield.

Once again, it was Heivia that brought it up.

“So why was the Mass Driver conglomerate attacking that moon villa from that Antarctic probe robot via a hacked satellite?”

“I will be going over this in the upcoming briefing, but whatever. It’s simple enough. The Capitalist Corporations major general who stays in that villa holds a lot of authority when it comes to military satellites and space stations. He was the driving force behind the decision to go with the laser space elevator over the mass driver. … Basically, it was probably resentment over their method not being adopted,” replied Froleytia bluntly who had returned to her seat. “They may have been trying to send an ironic message by going out of the way to use a laser to attack the villa.”

“But then…” started the princess.

She must not have been very hungry because she was only slowly bringing french fries to her mouth.

Quenser continued for her, “Doesn’t that make this entire conflict contained to the Capitalist Corporations? I don’t see why we would need to get involved. Our involvement could even make things worse and cause this to develop into a much bigger conflict.”

“…That is what makes this so difficult.”

“I take it there is some reason why we have to be involved,” said Heivia as he stabbed his fork into a Salisbury steak he had cut into

small pieces.

Froleytia nodded, “The Mass Driver conglomerate originally had their headquarters in Los Angeles of the Central Valley area of western America. But now they have begun a major migration away from the Capitalist Corporations. They seem to be moving south of the Sierra Madre area of Central America to the Iguazu area of South America.”

“What of it?”

“A Legitimacy Kingdom space development base is being built in the Amazon area near there. The method being used is a laser space elevator. The option of using a mass driver was brought up, but since we are at war with the Capitalist Corporations we could hardly get their cooperation for the technology required. It would be a problem if they attack it like the moon villa out of resentment over the method used.”

“So this war is one to guarantee safety?” asked the princess.

“Precisely.” Froleytia put her long, narrow Japanese-style kiseru in her mouth and lit the end. “The real pain in the ass is that this is really only a dispute within the Capitalist Corporations as Quenser pointed out. But since we do not know where the Mass Driver conglomerate will turn its sights next, we have to do something. The best option would be to take them out before anything could happen, but if we stick our noses too deeply into this, it could easily spark all-out war between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Capitalist Corporations. We do have a justification in protecting the space development base under construction in the Amazon area, but we have to make sure we do not deviate from that line. We have no idea where they will have this war of theirs, but it will all be a waste if Legitimacy Kingdom people get wrapped up in it,” said Froleytia with a sigh.

A short silence followed.

Finally, Quenser asked a timid question.

“Do we have any definite information on the possible Mass Driver conglomerate Object yet…?”

“Not yet. Something quite large was detected in Central America, but it may have been a gas tank like in Oceania.”

“But do we at least know where they are?”

“Actually, that’s a bit unclear as well.”

“?”

“The Andes mountain range in South America has elevations greater than 6000 meters. It is also famous for its mines. The south-eastern trade wind from the Pacific is acting up this year, so clouds with a lot of dust mixed in have flowed inland. This makes areas here and there that cannot be scanned by satellite.” Froleytia stopped to think for a bit. “We do not know anything for certain, but the Object this time will likely have the full technological prowess of the Mass Driver conglomerate put into it. That means it will likely have large caliber railguns. Since they also used railguns in the Antarctic, we can more or less count on it.”

“The ones in Antarctica were spares, but…”

“But they were not large enough to be main cannons, you mean?” Froleytia picked up on Quenser’s concern. “Most likely, those were not spares for the Object’s main cannon. After all, these are the people who built mass drivers that can reach satellite orbit or the moon. A single direct hit will of course be a death sentence, but the shockwave will also be a real danger. Make sure your ears and organs are not taken out.”

“And how exactly are we supposed to do that?” Heivia muttered under his breath.

However, that was not anything new.

When Quenser and Heivia were being targeted by any 50 meter Object, even its smallest weapons could blow them to pieces. Whenever they faced that great danger, they always asked the same question to no one in particular even as they knew it was meaningless.

What exactly are we supposed to do?

Part 5

Their current operation was to land on the coast of the Iguazu district in South America.

Their objective was the annihilation of the Mass Driver conglomerate that was supposedly lying inland.

As the pre-mission briefing ended, so did the maintenance on the princess's Object.

The many wires strung up from the assault landing aircraft carriers were removed, freeing the Baby Magnum from its bonds. The princess slowly piloted the Object out from between the two ships and then accelerated to 300 kph all at once. The Baby Magnum was a first generation Composite Multi Role Object, so it could display tremendous power on sea when it had a special ring-shaped float attached.

Land could be seen even from the ship's deck.

As Quenser watched the giant Object leave, Heivia called out to him.

"We're about to land, Quenser. We should get down below too. It's unlikely we'd be hit, but we're in range of a howitzer."

"The front of an assault landing aircraft carrier opens up like giant gates, right?" asked Quenser as he ran over to where Heivia was waiting. Rectangular lines separated out an area on one edge of the flat deck. It was an elevator that was originally meant to bring small fighters out onto the deck.

The two rode the elevator down for 30 seconds.

Walking down below, Heivia said, "This ship's role is simple. It charges in using its thick armor to withstand the gunfire and shells. Once it gets near the shore, the front opens up like a gate. After that, the landing party (that's us) charges out with a war cry."

"…You make us sound like a suicide unit."

"The princess goes ahead of us and cleans up the beach to make sure that doesn't happen," said Heivia, sounding fed up with it all. "She'll be rewarded if she takes out the Mass Driver conglomerate heading to South America, but we need to get on land first. Let's get this pain-in-the-ass sea bath over with and get the princess up on the beach."

The two headed to the very front of the ship.

Something like a large storage area was located there and it was filled with plenty of soldiers as well as the large vehicles loaded with equipment and materials for maintaining the Object.

Heivia sat in an arbitrary spot, took his rifle apart, and started making fine adjustments to various parts.

“Once the princess has secured the beach, we begin our sea bath. Once we reach the beach, we set up the bare minimum of maintenance facilities and a simple airfield. Other things like barracks are generally brought in via transport plane using the airfield. This ship alone isn’t enough to carry the 100+ vehicles needed to bring in everything we need.”

Quenser looked puzzled as he checked on his complement of explosives and checked on his radio.

“If the princess is that convenient, can’t we just stay here on the ship the whole time?”

“Don’t be stupid. The princess’s Baby Magnum can function on both sea and land, but it needs that special float to fight on sea. Its primary battlefield is on land. If we don’t remove that float, the princess can’t head on to the Iguazu battlefield. We need to spread out a net on one end of the beach and use a bunch of naturally decomposing repellant to give her a foothold.”

“…I guess it isn’t that easy,” said Quenser sounding disappointed.

Suddenly, a friendly transmission came in over the radio he was in the process of checking. It was from the princess who had reached the beach and was searching for any enemies.

“This is very boring work.”

“It’s better than killing people, right?”

“Waiting for all of you is boring,” said the princess with a sigh. “Quenser, you said you are unsure what the topic of your research should be, right? Then how about you look into a way to go back and forth between land and sea without exchanging parts?”

“Well, the princess certainly seems irritable today,” commented Heivia from the side.

As if to verify his words, a prickly silence was the only response from the princess.

Finally, she said, “Earlier, I received an email inviting me to a mock battle. It was more or less an order. It is taking place in the Normandy district a month from now.”

“Wow, that’s the Legitimacy Kingdom’s main country. That should be a nice performance. You can show off your awe-inspiring gallantry.”

“…I am just there as the underdog,” said the princess, sounding displeased. “Have you heard of the Bright Hopper?”

“Hm?” Quenser frowned. “Oh, right. Isn’t that supposed to be a new cutting edge Object we’re constructing? I heard its equipment is centralized on laser beams. Not only does it use static electricity to make its giant form float, it uses grasshopper-like legs to kick the ground and move at incredibly high speed. Is it already finished?”

“By the way, the Elite that pilots it is the eldest son of an influential noble family. To set it apart from other Objects, a high class carpenter was apparently commissioned to make the interior look like something from a royal castle,” added Heivia.

“Yeah, I’ve heard a lot of rumors about it. For example, I heard three prototype reactors were carefully made and tested before the actual Object was constructed. I have no idea how much of this stuff is true, though.”

It was to be a mock battle between two cutting edge Objects, but if the princess fought evenly or even defeated the Bright Hopper, she would be ruining the debut of their new Object. In other words, the higher ups of the Legitimacy Kingdom had told her to intentionally lose.

Heivia sounded utterly uninterested as he said, “Can’t you just hold back and get it over with like they want?”

“If I did that, the media would check the spec sheet and say Baby Magnum should have been able to do better than that. They would conclude its Elite must be unskilled.”

“God, what a pain…”

“I really don’t want that. The Bright Hopper’s specs are supposed to

be higher, so maybe I should decide to not hold back and fight seriously," said the princess, her words giving off a dangerous aura that hinted at a forthcoming storm. But she still had her work to deal with so she soon said, "I have finished checking the designated area. …I am picking up numerous metallic readings on the mountain slope."

"Numerous metallic readings?"

Tension ran through Quenser and Heivia, but a transmission from the assault landing aircraft carrier cut in.

"This is Charlemagne to Baby Magnum. According to one report, that mountain is filled with iron ore. Take that into consideration."

"Iron ore?" The princess fell silent. "(But there is no proof.)"

"Charlemagne to Baby Magnum. We have scanned the area via satellite, but there are no armored vehicles or the like presently visible. Even if the numerous metallic readings in the mountain are enemy weapons, wouldn't they need many times that many vehicles to support them?"

"There you have it," the princess said rather carelessly.

"Really?" Quenser said skeptically. "Um, if they turn out to be hidden enemy gun batteries rather than iron ore, we're the ones that will be in trouble. With the thick armor of the Object around you, you might not be able to grasp how important an issue this is."

"Mh. I said there is no problem, so there is no problem."

"I see, I see. Well, if these metallic readings do turn out to be gun batteries, you have to make me a special bavarois in the shape of tits. And this will of course be done with an audience."

The sound of something evaporating erupted out.

Baby Magnum had fired a warning laser beam from one of its main cannons as close as it could get to the mountain slope without hitting it. The dust and moisture in the air was roasted and an orange beam sliced through empty space.

"No response. No one is there."

"I'm not kidding about this bavarois if you're wrong."

“Enough of this nonsense,” cut in Froleytia. “Reports from the princess take priority for now. Okay, let’s get up on the beach and take off the princess’s lifesaver. It would be bad in more ways than one if the enemy found us while the transition is being carried out. Let’s get the princess up on land and able to move about freely before we’re noticed. That’s the best way to end this mission safely!!”

The transmission must have reached the Charlemagne’s bridge as well because the ship suddenly accelerated. Quenser felt the backwards tug of inertia.

Froleytia’s voice rang out as she gave the final check.

“In five minutes, we will head for the coast. We will charge into the ocean with small hydrofoils and head straight for land. Our top priority is removing the ocean float from the princess’s Object. If it comes to it, do not worry about equipment falling into the ocean. We can get replacement parts in by transport plane. All soldiers not in charge of carrying out this work are to protect and cooperate with those who are. That is all!!”

As if launched by those words, Quenser and the others began to move. They ran down the wide floor that slanted steadily forward and climbed aboard hydrofoils that were carrying large vehicles.

They had not intended for it to happen, but Quenser and Heivia just so happened to climb aboard the same hydrofoil. About 20 other soldiers were with them.

The time came soon enough.

The siren blared and the thick wall-like gate before them opened up to either side. The devices holding the hydrofoils in place naturally released and the hydrofoils slid down into the ocean one after another.

They were about 3 kilometers out from land.

More than 10 hydrofoils left the assault landing aircraft carrier Charlemagne and they headed across the ocean with almost no space between them. And it did not end there. Seven or eight other assault landing aircraft carriers similarly sent out hydrofoils.

The hydrofoils had special wing-like devices on the bottom that cut through the water as they continued forward. The resistance from

that allowed most of the boat to remain above water. This removed as much resistance from the water as possible, allowing the boats to soar across the water at dozens of kilometers per hour.

It would probably take about 2 or 3 minutes for them to arrive on the beach.

Quenser stared forward while gripping the handrail of the hydrofoil.

He could see the land clearly from where he was. It was not very developed. The beach was covered in driftwood and trash and what looked like a small mountain of about 100 meters could be seen beyond the beach. According to the princess, there was no sign of enemy soldiers or an Object on the beach.

However…

“Hey, did something just flash!?” shouted Heivia.

It came from the small mountain of about 100 meters beyond the beach. Coming from the middle of the slope that was enveloped in green, something arced through the air at high speed, coming their way. Heivia had seen the light of the sun reflecting from the projectile.

(…A railgun!?)

That was Quenser’s immediate thought, but he did not have time to say it aloud.

The relatively heavy shell arced high into the sky and mercilessly fell at Mach 5 toward the ocean surface Quenser and the others were travelling along.

A tremendous noise and a huge splash of water exploded up.

Quenser’s vision was filled with water. He had avoided a direct hit, but the ocean surface roared and the hydrofoil flew into the air as if the ocean had become a ramp. His body shook when they landed and his hands left the handrail. He almost fell straight into the ocean.

He was on the verge of death, but Quenser threw his hands into the air and shouted, “Yahoo!! Bavarooooiiiiisssssss!!”

“Why the hell are you celebrating with a smile covering your face!? They’re bombarding us!!”

It did not end with that one Railgun shot.

One after another, 40 or 50 giant shells arced through the sky.

Quenser immediately grabbed his radio and shouted to the princess in her Object.

“Shoot them down!!”

“!!”

The princess complied with his ridiculous request.

Of her 100 weapons both large and small, the anti-air lasers opened fire.

The sizzling sound of evaporating water exploded out. Orange light took the form of beams that fried the dust and dirt in the air. The beams pierced the Mach 5 railgun shells one after another, melting them away in midair.

But even she had her limits.

About a third of them made it through. Large cruise missiles or fighters were one thing, but the railgun shells may have simply been too small a target. Also, she might have been able to manage against small targets like a howitzer or short range missiles, but the speed of the railgun was simply too great.

The masses of steel that slipped through the anti-air network mercilessly rained down toward Quenser and the others.

Multiple pillars of water shot up.

The shockwave of the shells hitting the water struck Quenser and he saw another nearby hydrofoil tip up on one side like a car driving on two wheels in an action move. It then collapsed over and fully capsized.

“Shit!!”

“Continue the landing!! If you aren’t directly hit, you won’t die!! Turning back now will only get the assault landing aircraft carriers hit!! Continue on and work with the princess to silence the enemy

as quickly as possible! That is how you can survive!!" shouted Froleytia over the radio.

Heivia held onto the handrail with all his might and clenched his teeth.

"God dammit!! This is completely reckless! That commander really is sadistic!! Her voice always sounds so bright while giving orders like this!!"

"Yeah, and your body trembles just as much when you hear the orders, Heivia!!"

"Hey, Quenser. Do you think the Mass Driver conglomerate's Object is hidden in that mountain? What if that mountain is actually the Object itself hidden under a bunch of dirt!?"

"That can't be! The railguns are firing from areas 500 meters apart!! Most likely, this is the same as in Antarctica!! They dug holes in the slope, stuffed spare Object railguns inside, and hid them under vegetation!" shouted Quenser as he hit the switch on his radio.

He was speaking to the Charlemagne's bridge.

"This is Quenser!! I have a question for someone on the bridge who has data from the satellite. Have any people been spotted on that mountain!?"

"This is Charlemagne. No heat signatures or electromagnetic signals suggesting a human presence have been detected. Most likely, the spare cannons are being fired with a remote control program."

"Are there any people's homes or other buildings there!?"

"None have been detected. All we can see there are the spare cannons."

"Okay." Quenser changed the frequency and contacted the princess. "Baby Magnum, you don't have to worry about getting civilians involved."

At that point, Quenser took in a deep breath and then shouted with all his strength.

"Don't hold back! Blow that entire mountain away!!"

A great roar rang out.

The Baby Magnum's 7 main cannons located on its 7 arms spread out. The base of each cannon could rotate like a microscope in order to switch out the type of cannon to match the situation.

It was currently firing its low-stability plasma cannons.

A special gas was loaded into the barrel and a massive amount of electricity was used to create manmade plasma. This was then fired at the target. Its maximum range was around 10 kilometers, but it could only reliably shoot through an enemy object at a range of about 3 or 4 kilometers. It was one of the Baby Magnum's most powerful weapons.

Instead of focusing the 7 cannons on a single point, the fire was spread out evenly across the mountains.

"Wow. You can tell we're in South America; there are palm trees growing naturally. These long-sleeved, long-leg military uniforms just aren't right. It's so hot I'm expecting there to be bikini babes around here somewhere."

"It's only 19 degrees, so I think it might be a bit too soon for a bikini. What month is it again? I think you'd be starting to want a coat back in the home country."

"I really don't care. Just bring on the bikini babes."

While looking at his handheld device, Quenser wiped seawater and sweat from his face. He did not even notice that doing so only smeared sand on his face.

Heivia switched on the infrared and ultraviolet sensors on his rifle as well as the microphone used to pick up distant noises.

"This has turned into a real mess even for a war. Operating inside Legitimacy Kingdom territory is one thing, but should we really be entering land that isn't even ours without permission?"

"Come to think of it, who owns Iguazu? Since the Mass Driver conglomerate is fleeing here, I'm assuming it isn't the Capitalist Corporations."

"It's independent. In other words, it's a blank area."

“?”

“After the collapse of the UN, the nations of the world collapsed, split apart, absorbed each other, and otherwise redrew the world’s national boundaries. With world powers like the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations and the Faith Organization, the world map was split apart by color like stained glass. However, there are some areas that do not belong to any world power.”

“You mean dictatorships like that Oceanian military nation?”

“Not quite. They don’t even have a government. The customs of the native people make the rules. Some of the areas that were late to join any world power due to political issues during the collapse of the UN are still left hanging there with no color.” Heivia used his rifle’s sensors to carefully check around the area. “Places like this are often used as relay points for criminal organizations. They’ll route money through them, store weapons in them, and other things. However, those types of professional criminals tend to operate by hopping from one blank area to another, so examples of someone setting up a permanent presence like the Mass Driver conglomerate is trying to do are quite rare.”

“So Objects from two foreign forces are coming in shooting up the place. It must suck to get caught up in that.”

“That doesn’t just go for places like this. Wherever the battlefield is, it’s nothing but trouble for the people who live there.”

As they spoke, a fellow soldier’s voice reached their ears over the radio.

“Area C, no enemy soldiers found. All we found was the barrels buried in dirt and thick power cables that were connected to something.”

Heivia butted in and spoke into Quenser’s radio.

“Area H, we haven’t found anything either. We’ve used all the sensors at our disposal, but we can only find dirt and rock.”

Similar reports came in one after another. Apparently, the enemy soldiers had never been there in the first place or they had quickly gathered their equipment and made a hasty retreat.

Suddenly, Froletyia spoke up.

“The removal of Baby Magnum’s sea float is complete. The groups in Areas A-D are to turn back and begin preparing the equipment for the simple airfield. The groups in Areas E-H are to extend the search to everywhere within 5 kilometers. Once the work is complete, we will call in the transport planes. If you don’t finish, the baths and beds can’t get here, so prepare yourselves.”

“Dammit, we’re in Area H. We have to stay out here.”

“Yeah, but leveling the land with a tractor to create runways or raising radar towers is no picnic either.”

“After that comment, you’re not allowed to complain if we run smack into a Mass Driver conglomerate Object.”

Quenser and Heivia nervously continued across the Iguazu land, but despite their expectations, they found nothing more. The gentle upward slope continued as they headed inland. The area seemed to be a coffee plantation because many trees about 3 or 4 meters tall were lined up along the relatively flat plain.

Heivia looked down at his feet.

“We’re supposed to be searching, but if they flew off by helicopter, there won’t be anything left. Even their scent will end.”

“You idiot. If a helicopter had been hovering near the ground, the wind from the rotor would have flattened the grass in a circle at the spot. You know how massive those spares are. It’s impossible to completely remove all traces.”

“Really? That was quite the welcome we got, but there doesn’t seem to be a single enemy soldier in the area. It might have been a while since they set it up. If that’s the case, I doubt there’s much left in the way of hints,” said Heivia in annoyance as he looked at the surrounding trees. “Someone planted all these trees here.”

“Come to think of it, why is this area called Iguazu?” asked Quenser.

“Because of the Iguazu River, one of the largest in the world. During the rainy season, it reaches 4 kilometers across.”

“Hmm. And so people built cities around that large river?”

“No, the Iguazu River is actually hundreds of kilometers from here. A ton of manmade rivers stretch from there like a tournament's brackets, supplying each area with water. It seems the water supply for this area is controlled by the Iguazu Dam. But…” Heivia trailed off.

The trees of the coffee plantation were neatly lined up, but there was no sign of any broken branches. In other words, it did not appear a giant Object had passed through.

“??? What is going on? Don’t tell me they used a power cable hundreds of kilometers long to fire at us from outside the country.”

Even if they had, it would have been impossible to retrieve the cable in such a short time. There was also no sign of disturbed dirt suggesting it had been buried.

After thinking for a bit and not coming up with an answer, Quenser sighed.

“…So we’re left with just the spares like in Antarctica. That just leaves me with a bad feeling.”

Heivia shrugged and said, “I may not fully understand the situation, but I know how I’m going to report this.” He then spoke into the radio. “This is Heivia. We’ve performed a sweep of our designated area, but could find no sign of the Mass Driver conglomerate. There are no enemy soldiers here at least for now.”

“…Should you really be saying that? If we don’t follow up on anything suspicious, we might end up targeted by a railgun buried in a hole and covered in vegetation again,” muttered Quenser.

However, Froleytia seemed satisfied simply with what they knew for the moment.

“Well done. I doubt you will find an answer to any of those questions just by standing there thinking about them for a few minutes. We can all think about all this at ease once the base is complete. Quenser, Heivia, return here.”

“Ugh. You split the groups in two, but are we going to get stuck with preparing the airfield anyway?”

“No. Since you completed the job assigned to you, you have the right to take a nice rest. Since this is not an urgent manner, you can

take your time in getting back as long as you are back by sunset. Although personally I think the base would be the easiest place to rest since it is the safest place here."

The transmission ended.

Quenser and Heivia exchanged glances.

"…What should we do? Should we head straight back to the base?"

"What a pain. We walked 5 kilometers here. I want to at least take a break to recover some stamina before heading back."

The two sat down in a position that hid them behind a coffee tree. They pulled their flavorless rations out of their pockets and started eating the giant eraser-like food.

"Dammit. Can't they do something about these rations? They do nothing other than teach you the value of proper food."

"I heard the food development division is developing things like container-shaped fields. By bringing together wild plants that can be harvested in about a week after being nothing but a seed, they can ensure a food supply that is more efficient than having rations flown in."

"…But wouldn't that be all vegetables…or rather, edible wild plants?"

"This is my first time taking part in a landing operation, so what do we do after building the base zone at the beach?"

"Hm? First, the princess's Object will head inland and into the mountains. Meanwhile, we will use half the day to slowly move the convoy forward. By repeating that process, we will move the base zone to the front lines 100 kilometers inland."

The large building-like facilities were actually made up of multiple vehicles. To move the base, they had to be taken apart and reassembled, so it took a lot of work.

"That sure is taking our time. Shouldn't we be getting this over with quickly? The Mass Driver conglomerate might get away while we're doing this. Their route is supposed to be from Central America to here in South America, but they might make a U-turn partway through."

“As long as the princess catches up with them in the end, it doesn’t matter. We’re just meant to stay behind and replenish her supplies. We do nothing more than extend the princess’s range of activity. You remember what we went through when we lost our Object in Alaska, right? That’s the advantage we have here. Once the princess arrives at the battlefield, it’ll be all over. If this is all resolved before we make it to the front lines, what does it matter?”

“And what if the Mass Driver conglomerate has an Object?”

“The Object on its own might be able to escape. However, all the maintenance equipment and facilities take longer. We’ll make sure they feel the pain of running and abandoning their maintenance unit if it comes to that.”

“I see,” muttered Quenser.

The way each individual action taken to decide the winner was carried out in a timeframe counted in days left that single boy unable to really grasp how long things took. However, that was just the way military actions were. In the days when battleships, aircraft carriers, and submarines were actively used, a single operation took even more time than that.

“But…” started Heivia. “You mentioned it before Quenser, but if the Mass Driver conglomerate really does have an Object, where do you think it is?”

“According to the map, there are coal mines in this area. Do you think they could hide a 50 meter Object in there?”

“No, those things weigh 200,000 tons. A coal mine would probably collapse if one went inside it.”

“Just like in Antarctica, we can’t find the Object that was powering the spares.”

Quenser stared up into the sky for a bit.

He munched on the flavorless rubber-like ration.

“Do you think they really have developed a stealth Object that can’t be detected by radar or satellite? Hey, Heivia…Heivia?”

He brought his gaze back down from the sky to find the other boy gone.

He looked around in confusion until…

“Hey, Quenser! Over here! I was just invited to tea by the old man and woman who run this coffee plantation!”

“Huh!? Why is some old couple having a picnic in leisure chairs in the middle of the battlefield!?”

“You idiot. This is their private property. They said their daughter almost never brings her family by to visit, so they never get to see their grandkids. …Eh? You say your grandson is as handsome as me?”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait! They shouldn’t be relaxing! They need to evacuate! This might become the front lines of a battle between two Objects!”

“Quenser, just drink some tea. Although, if you’d rather sit over there eating those flavorless rations, be my guest.”

“Fine!! I’ll accept the invitation, but we’re getting them out of here afterwards!!” shouted Quenser as he headed for one of the leisure chairs.

He took a cup from an old lady who looked like kindness personified.

“…If they run a coffee plantation, why are they serving tea?”

“They say they’ve grown sick of the black stuff,” said Heivia as he dropped a square caramel into his cup for some reason.

With a confused look, Quenser asked, “What are you doing, Heivia?”

“There are different ways to drink it. Did you think sugar, milk, and lemon were the only options? How about you think for yourself before questioning and complaining?”

“This old man has been pouring brandy into my tea without me asking for it. Is that just how things are done here?”

Quenser looked up as if to avert his gaze from the cup that was becoming something quite dangerous. The blue sky seemed to continue on forever and clouds were moving so slowly it seemed the sun would set before they disappeared from view.

“It really makes you think about world peace, doesn’t it?”

“Well, war is a real pain in the ass almost by definition.”

Quenser’s radio then picked up a transmission.

He assumed it was a message or order from Froleytia, but it was not.

The voice was male.

“Legitimacy Kingdom 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, this is Major Halreed Copacabana of Legitimacy Kingdom 52nd Mobile Maintenance Battalion.”

“Oh, crap.”

Quenser and Heivia both frantically put in the headphones for the radio. They were afraid of getting the old man and woman of the plantation into any kind of unnecessary trouble by letting them overhear.

Meanwhile, the man’s voice continued over the radio.

“Although, it would probably be faster to just say I’m the pilot Elite of the Bright Hopper.”

“?”

The Bright Hopper was the name of a cutting edge Object. Quenser had a feeling it was the one the princess was upset about having to lose a mock battle against in a month.

“We are currently thinking of taking a route through Central America to meet up with you from the Amazon district. If we could perform a pincer attack on the Mass Driver conglomerate, that would be ideal, but is that even possible with your schedule?”

Froleytia’s voice then joined in.

She sounded somehow bitter.

“This is Major Froleytia Capistrano. I am currently in command of the 37th. We have confirmed your location, but we are still quite far from there. We would love to work together, but if we cannot wait, we will begin the operation as originally scheduled. Keep that in mind if you intend to begin a joint operation.”

“Understood. In that case, we would like for you to drive the Mass Driver conglomerate’s Object north, so we can take it out.”

Quenser looked over toward Heivia and spoke quietly.

“Is he asking us to merely wound the enemy and let him finish it off?”

“Didn’t I tell you? The Bright Hopper’s Elite is a rich boy from an influential noble family. He probably sees this incident as nothing more than a performance meant to show off the Bright Hopper.”

Froleytia would not want something like that.

They had suffered losses in both Antarctica and in the landing at Iguazu. And all that was before an actual Object had showed up. If both forces truly clashed, the odds were good that things would get much more serious.

“Capistrano of the 37th to Copacabana of the 52nd. Unfortunately, we do not have the spare strength needed to chase the enemy around like the 52nd seems to. We will finish this if we get the chance. I hope you do not mind if we do not comply with your proposal.”

“Halreed of the 52nd to Froleytia of the 37th. If I may give my personal opinion, I think you should simply comply with my request. Both publicly and privately.”

Halreed then ended the transmission.

Quenser lightly waved the radio around.

“What did you make of that?”

“They know each other. And Froleytia is none too pleased. Over,” replied Heivia after taking the cup of tea from his lips. “The horrid atmosphere you only get from noble society was all over that. It seems our beautiful lady has her own troubles.”

“Eh? Froleytia’s a noble?”

“In a way, she’s famous.”

“In what way?” Quenser replied in frustration, but Heivia seemed pleased to have evaded the question.

He seemed to like giving enigmatic comments.

A while later, a transmission came in from Froleytia.

“Quenser, Heivia. Change of plans. I’m guessing you are lazing around to recover your stamina, but get back to the base right away.”

“Fine, fine. Are you going to order us to give you a life consultation?”

“Heivia, be prepared to have the heel of my boot digging into your jaw,” said Froleytia with disinterest. “I want to get this over with before the Bright Hopper’s intervention ruins our pace. I do not want his attempts for personal glory to destroy our pace and cause unnecessary losses to my unit. Our schedule is going to be a bit rushed, so I want all spare manpower at work.”

“In that case…”

“Hey, Quenser. The old lady says she’ll give us some cookies to take with us.”

They wanted to have them evacuate, but the old couple seemed unwilling to leave their coffee plantation. They decided it would therefore be best to get the convoy moving as quickly as possible so it could safely pass through the plantation. That way, the battlefield would naturally move to somewhere else and the plantation would be less likely to be damaged.

Quenser waved back at the old man who was waving goodbye and asked, “By the way, how much power does the Bright Hopper have?”

“It’s a second generation Object that specializes in land battles, so it can’t be used for sea battles. That’s why it took longer to land in South America and was late to the operation. However, the rumor is that the values on the spec sheet suggest not even 3 of our Baby Magnums could defeat it in a land battle.”

“Let’s keep that rumor a secret from the princess. She may look expressionless at first glance, but she actually has a lot of pride in that kind of thing. I could see her suggesting she prove the rumor wrong.”

As the two chatted on the way back to the base, a transmission from

the assault landing aircraft carrier reached them.

“This is Charlemagne. We have some information that might give those tired of waiting something new to live for.”

“?”

“A chaff missile meteorological weapon has been fired from the Parana Mountains 50 kilometers north of here. It was the type that mixes small particles in with the natural clouds to create temporary shelter from radar. Currently, the satellite surveillance network is unusable. The movement of the clouds is widening the area we can’t monitor.”

“…If they had something like that, why didn’t they use it in the first place?”

“Maybe because it’s similar to the surface-to-air missile in Antarctica. It gives away their position because we can see where it’s fired from. However, now that they could not prevent the Baby Magnum from landing, they have no other option.”

“We recommend immediately sending the Baby Magnum out before the enemy soldiers have time to evacuate from the launch point. An Object that can move at a maximum of 500 kph should have no problem travelling that distance,” said the man on the Charlemagne.

“Froleytia here, understood. I will take your opinion into consideration.”

Quenser frowned and said, “Wait a second. If they’re willing to give away their position in order to fire that chaff missile, they must have some reason they don’t want us to find them. Is the Mass Driver conglomerate’s main force in that area 50 kilometers north of here?”

“Yeah, they may want to hide themselves from the satellite surveillance network as soon as possible. I doubt they fired the missile from the exact same position as the unit, but they should be within a few kilometers of the launch point, don’t you think? If the wind causes the effects of the chaff missile to spread rapidly, this could be a problem, but if we can bring an end to this now, everything’s fine.”

“…”

In that case, what was it that had been supplying power to the spare railguns?

With the spares at Antarctica and there, quite a number had been gathered. And they supposedly needed an Object to power those spares.

Objects were synonymous with war.

The Mass Driver conglomerate held enough military might to wage a true war, so why were they intent on running?

And something odd stuck out about the use of the chaff missile.

With how accurately they had been targeted when landing at Iguazu, the Mass Driver conglomerate must have detected them well beforehand. The conglomerate was an organization related to space development, so there was a good chance they had a satellite of their own.

The satellite surveillance network was indeed a problem for the Mass Driver conglomerate, but they also benefitted from it. The chaff missile had cut off all of the satellites, so they would have no idea what route the Legitimacy Kingdom Object was taking to attack them. If they were truly intent on running, would they themselves create a situation where they had to fear a surprise attack at every turn?

Also, if the enemy actually had an Object, it was a case of 1 to 1.

The odds of victory were about 50/50. If they did not defeat the Baby Magnum then, the Bright Hopper would join in and make it 2 to 1. Would they really give up that chance?

“It can’t be…”

A bad feeling welled up in Quenser’s chest.

He had a feeling the enemy was not that naïve.

He had a feeling he was overlooking something.

Overlooking some other logical reason to cut off the satellites with the chaff missile.

“It can’t be!!”

Part 6

The Legitimacy Kingdom 52nd Mobile Maintenance Battalion's Object, Bright Hopper, continued forward through a mountainous region.

Its overall form was that of a giant sphere with a circular static electricity producing device attached to the bottom. The device allowed the Object to float slightly off the ground and three grasshopper leg-like units attached to the back would kick off the ground to move forward.

With each jump, a cloud of dust would explode up behind the Object.

In exchange for that destruction, the Bright Hopper was designed to carry out extremely high speed battles at speeds of 700-800 kph. The grasshopper leg design prevented it from moving backwards and only allowed forward movement, but no fear could be seen on the pilot Elite Halreed's face.

Fleeing backwards was what unknown nobodies did. A proud Legitimacy Kingdom noble would approach his enemy at top speed and pierce the enemy Object's armor with a quick attack. That quick destruction was the trick to quickly ending a war and preventing as much damage to both enemy and ally as possible. It was a compassionate and benevolent strategy.

The radar picked up on something flying at high altitude and Halreed immediately shot it down with an anti-air laser.

He was not worried in the slightest.

(…A missile?)

He frowned.

Halreed had of course been informed of the chaff missile fired previously.

It seemed the enemy was cutting off the electromagnetic and infrared links between the Bright Hopper and the military satellite in order to hide their location as much as possible. He had shot down the missile, but the chaff within had still spread out within

the atmosphere to a certain extent. Static came from a few of his instruments.

He was 500 kilometers away.

However, once he got up among the mountains, the path the Object could travel through was as complex as the wrinkles of a brain. He was losing time due to that, but Halreed showed no impatience on his face.

(So they're trying to hide. Just how cowardly are they?)

He determined that their decision to hide instead of fighting was evidence of the difference in ability between himself and them. The truly strong never needed to hide. A lion did not ask for protection and a giant Object was in a similar position on the battlefield.

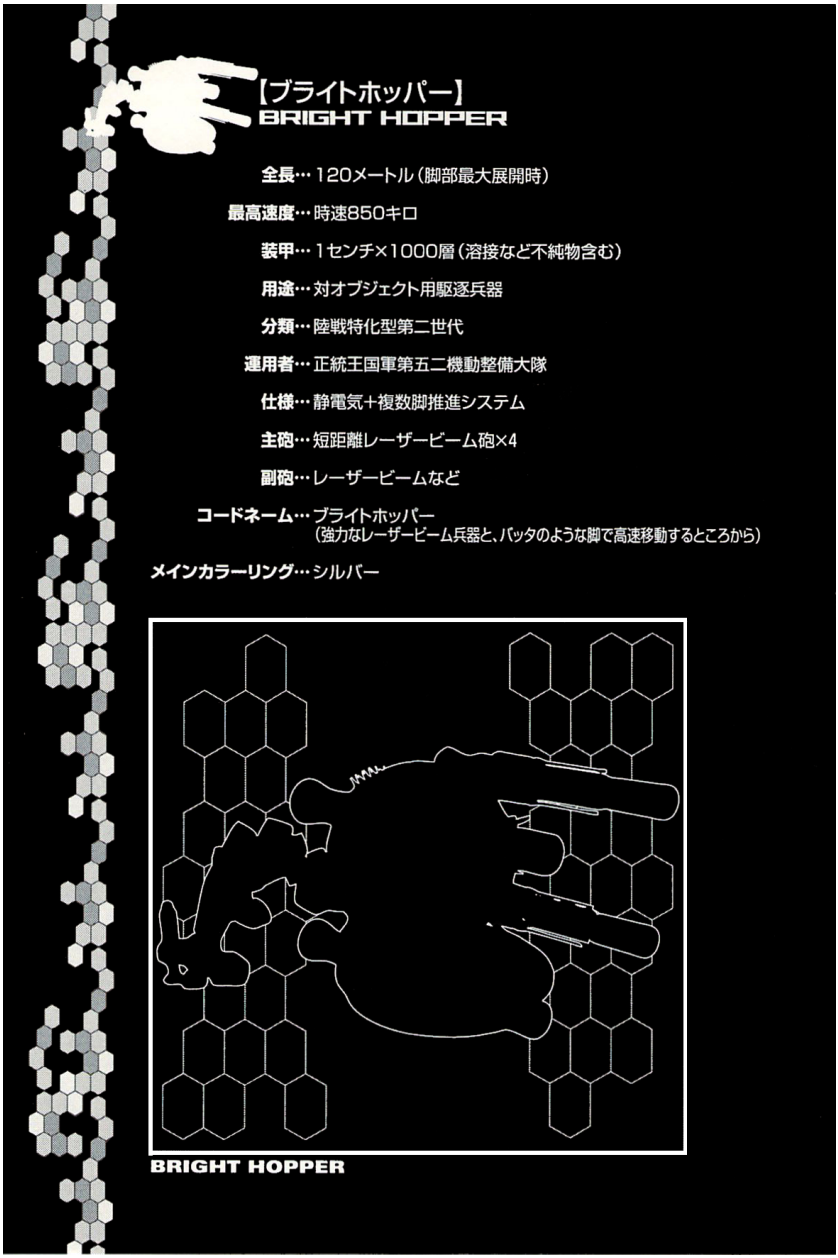
Normally, he would have already annihilated the Mass Driver conglomerate by that time.

He had not done so because the Bright Hopper was specialized for land battles, so forcing it through sea routes had taken time. After covering it with countless balloons filled with a special gas to give it buoyancy, multiple tankers had towed it.

According to his subordinates who specialized in gathering intelligence, a similar sight of "tankers with something large" had been seen while the Mass Driver conglomerate was travelling from North America to South America. However, Halreed did not view it as a threat. The way he saw it…

(Even if that report was accurate, it could still be a dummy. It could be a gas tank or something like in Oceania.)

And if the Mass Driver conglomerate really did have Object development technology, they would surely have been a bit more strategic. It may have been true that Objects were synonymous with war, but the major powers of the world like the Legitimacy Kingdom and Capitalist Corporations had plenty of Objects. Creating an Object or two was not enough to put up a straight fight.



Also…

(It doesn't matter if it's real.)

Halreed grinned.

(A quickly put together model is no match for a Second Generation Object like Bright Hopper.)

As he travelled at high speed, Halreed performed checks on his main cannons.

His one worry was about leaving his maintenance convoy so far behind in his rush to reach the battlefield. If he waited long enough for them to arrive too, it would take days, so he had no real choice. However, it still meant the Bright Hopper could not resupply or undergo maintenance.

(I just have to wait until I can meet up with Froleytia's 37th. There is a certain level of commonality to Legitimacy Kingdom Object designs. While nothing can be done about the individual weapons, I can have armor plates and the attached box for exhaust gas replaced with ones for the Baby Magnum.)

He would be butting in and taking the spare parts dutifully prepared for the Baby Magnum and the princess, but Halreed had no problem with it. The only thing he felt was disgust over having to use inferior First Generation Object parts. For better or worse, he was a stereotypical noble. He was not too fond of the mere existence of a battalion supported by a female commander and Elite.

(But it will all be over soon.)

He finished checking on his main cannons.

The Bright Hopper was specialized to carry out history's fastest combat, so all of its weapons were laser beams. That monster literally attacked at the speed of light. Naturally, its main cannons were high output laser beams.

He would approach at high speed, fire countless lasers at the enemy Object's feet, and then accurately aim the main high output laser cannons while the enemy was unable to move. One blast from those would be enough to blow the enemy away. Theoretically, the Bright Hopper could instantly destroy any Object in the world as long as it made it within its 5 kilometer attack range. The Multi Role Objects made to fight in various environments had less power for each individual weapon, so he did not like being lumped into the same category as those First Generation Objects.

(It doesn't matter what kind of Object the enemy might have. A single honorable strike of light will easily take care of this supposed large target that is trying to flee.)

In that instant, something before him flashed.

Instead of from the mountains, it was coming from the sky above.

Halreed frowned slightly.

And then…

Part 7

A tremendous shockwave slammed into Quenser and Heivia's ears as they attempted to return to the maintenance base zone. However, this was not merely a noise that vibrated their eardrums. It was a mass of noise that resounded in their gut like they were listening to death metal from a speaker larger than they were.

"Wh-what was that!?"

"This is Charlemagne!! Something has happened to Bright Hopper outside of the chaff missile cloud. It was heading here from 550 kilometers north when it was seriously damaged. I repeat, the Bright Hopper was seriously damaged on its way here!!"

"Wait a second."

Heivia had thought something nearby had exploded, so he had gotten down on the ground. He now stood up and could tell his body was trembling.

"I thought the Mass Driver conglomerate's Object was more than 50 kilometers from here. Was the sound of it firing just that loud? Not even plastic explosives detonating nearby would resonate in your gut that much!"

"And what do you mean 500 kilometers away? This is a mountainous region! Did they blow away the mountains in between!?"

"It used a high-angle trajectory." Quenser's question was answered by Froleytia over the radio. "It's the same as a baseball. They fire the railgun at a high angle and let it fall back down! That is more effective for long distance bombardments and it eliminates the

problem of the mountains to a certain extent!! Since the clouds were not blown away after the shot, it may not have ever reached higher than 2500 meters!!"

"But…"

Quenser's doubt was still not completely gone. The Bright Hopper was a cutting edge Second Generation Object that specialized in high-speed movement. It was not normal to have something like that destroyed in a single shot.

However, the situation did not give him time to calmly think. A further transmission came from the assault landing aircraft carrier.

"This is Charlemagne!! We have been unable to confirm the ejection of the pilot Elite, Major Halreed Copacabana! We cannot detect an emergency rescue signal either!!"

"…You've gotta be kidding me. It was really destroyed in one shot?"

Objects generally fought at ranges of 5 to 10 kilometers. While their main cannons could fire farther than that, the speed and power of the railguns and coilguns dropped as the distance increased and laser beams decayed as they travelled through the air. The same went for the heat of the low-stability plasma cannons, so it was assumed that they had to get that close in order to pierce the enemy Object's thick armor.

In fact, it was quite rare indeed for a weapon to preserve its deadly ability at a distance of 500 kilometers while under 1 atmosphere of pressure. High altitude fighters or ballistic missiles that could be brought down with the slightest damage were one thing, but Quenser had certainly never heard of a valid strike being done to an Object from that distance.

And yet…

"It seems Bright Hopper's reactor has been completely destroyed. The estimated speed is…!? M-Mach 25!? Was that really a metal shell!?" came the report from Charlemagne.

"I-impossible!! That has to be a measurement error! R-right. That was a railgun fired at a high-angle trajectory, right? If it was fired at Mach 25, it would just continue up into the atmosphere rather than falling back down!!"

“Don’t ask me!! It might have special changeable grooves on the side of the giant shell to alter its trajectory to a certain extent, but don’t ask me for details!!” replied the Charlemagne.

“This is just ridiculous…” muttered Quenser. “This must be why they fired the chaff missile. It wasn’t to flee. It was to prevent us from knowing when they were going to fire!!”

He frantically pulled out his handheld device and switched to the GPS map. A large area was covered in white clouds so the various sensors could give him no information, but he caught a glimpse of a giant form through a gap in the clouds. The chaff missile was a type of meteorological weapon, so it used natural clouds. It must not have been enough to cover absolutely everything up.

“Dammit. Not only do they really have an Object, but it’s clearly Generation Two.”

Quenser suddenly felt faint.

That was the Mass Driver conglomerate Object.

Their job had changed from a one-sided interception using an Object to a war between their Object and another Object that odds were good they could not actually defeat.

Quenser stared at the screen of the device.

He saw a round body and a main cannon over twice as long as that body.

All Object main cannons were gigantic, but this one’s was especially huge. The reactor was not the core of the machine. The main cannon was the center and the parts needed to use it in actual battle were gathered around it.

The long weapon was supported by something like a sniper rifle’s bipod. When Quenser saw it, he thought his heart would stop.

Every few seconds, the GPS map would refresh its data.

From that, he could tell the giant form on the map was slowly rotating. It was as if the giant main cannon was now being aimed their way…or more accurately, at the Baby Magnum.

That was when the gap in the clouds closed and the Object was

completely hidden once more.

If it got her in its sights, it was all over.

There was no way to avoid a shell flying at Mach 25.

But…

“How can it aim so accurately from such a great distance?”

Quenser gave voice to the unreasonable question that had come to him.

(That was 500 kilometers away. Does it just use infrared lasers or electromagnetic waves? No, the area between the Mass Driver conglomerate Object and the Bright Hopper is filled with mountains. If it was sending out a signal from ground level, the mountains would have prevented it from getting a lock.)

Quenser first thought it must be using satellite lasers to accurately aim despite the terrain, but he immediately rejected the idea.

That would leave no reason for them to blind the satellites with the chaff missiles.

The Mass Driver conglomerate had gone out of their way to fire a chaff missile directly above the Bright Hopper just before it had been hit. That had been effective as a means of cutting off the Bright Hopper’s access to any military satellites, but it also prevented the Mass Driver conglomerate’s satellites from using its various cameras and sensors in the areas below the clouds.

Since they had chosen to use the chaff missiles, they must not have been relying on a military satellite.

Which meant…

“Wait a second…”

Quenser raised his head in a sudden realization.

He looked up at the clouds spreading above his head.

“They’re actually using the clouds!! It’s the same as how they fire the Railgun up at an angle and have it fall back down. The chaff missile created clouds that reflect electromagnetic signals. They send their locking signal up at an angle so it is reflected back down by the clouds and at the target on the ground. That way they can accurately lock onto their target while keeping their own location hidden. That way they can aim from above even in a mountainous area that tends to cut off electromagnetic signals!!”

“That would never work! Sure, they might be able to use the clouds to get their targeting signal to the princess, but the signal wouldn’t just be reflected straight back to them. It would be reflected in pretty much every direction, so they wouldn’t have a strong enough signal to accurately aim with!”

“What if they have some kind of compensation program? Something that can accurately pick up on the location of the target from the weak signal that is sent back amongst the diffuse reflection!! They specialize in space development, right? They could have based it on some project to intercept signals or lasers from military satellites that have been slightly reflected by the earth’s atmosphere!!”

Quenser then grabbed his radio.

He gathered up all his strength and shouted.

“Baby Magnum, this is Quenser!! The enemy Object is using the meteorological weapon to reflect their targeting signal off the clouds! Use your low-stability plasma cannons or something to blow away the clouds above you!!”

The giant Object responded to his words.

The seven main cannons supported by its seven arms aimed for the sky. Instead of focusing on a single point, multiple clouds were targeted at random. With a tremendous noise and flashes of light, giant holes dozens of meters across appeared in the clouds. Quenser was well removed from the Object, but the noise was enough to send pain rushing through his eardrums.

However, the entire 50 kilometer space between the two Objects was covered by clouds. Just opening a few holes was not enough to clear away all of them.

Most likely, the targeting signal was still accurately capturing the princess's location.

"Shit."

Quenser estimated the locations of the two Objects on the map displayed on his handheld device.

"Run to the weeeeeeeeeeessssssssssttttttttttttt!!"

The princess must not have been able to get rid of that sense of danger either. The movements of her Object looked frantic.

Full power was sent to the propulsion device that used static electricity to make the Object hover and used lasers to expand the air. The Baby Magnum moved as if it had suddenly jumped.

It moved so a small mountain was exactly between the two Objects.

But…

A deadly shell tore mercilessly through the air at Mach 25.

It looked like an orange beam of light. It must have actually been flying in an arc, but the scale was so large it looked like it was falling down diagonally to Quenser. The railgun shell seemed to fly in a straight line past the small mountain and for the Baby Magnum.

Its aim was off slightly, but it was unclear if that was due to the mountains causing problems with the radar signal or due to the princess's excellent reaction.

But even so, the powerful railgun still grazed the Baby Magnum.

An explosion rang out.

However, it went beyond what the human ear could detect.

The Baby Magnum's armor was peeled up, and about half of the mass of the nearby small mountain was gouged out.

Quenser and Heivia were over a kilometer away, but their bodies

were still slammed mercilessly to the ground. Pain exploded from each and every one of their internal organs. They could no longer hear any noise. The great noise had temporarily deafened them. Quenser sluggishly reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked like a hearing aid. He plugged a cord into his radio and stuck it behind his ear. It used what was known as bone conduction.

"…Baby Magnum has been partially damaged!! Main cannons 1 through 3 are no longer functioning!!"

"I can…still go on… As long as I have just 1 of the 7 cannons…"

"Something is wrong with the propulsion device! It is unclear if you can pull off the high speeds needed for battle!! I recommend the maintenance soldiers perform an emergency check of the leg area!!"

Something like a small contrail could be seen overhead. It had likely been created by the disruption in the atmosphere caused by the railgun shell passing through.

Still collapsed on the ground, Quenser grabbed his handheld device. Looking like someone checking their alarm clock after waking up, he operated the small device. He could see Baby Magnum on the GPS map. He should not have been able to see it due to the effects of the chaff missile, but the shock wave from the blast had apparently blown the clouds away. A round hole had opened up above it.

The armor on the Baby Magnum's right side had burst open like a crushed can. The sharp edges fluttered like the wings of some strange insect. It seemed the center had not been blown out, but it still must have experienced quite a shock. It was no exaggeration to call it a miracle that the princess was still alive.

And…

Another gap in the clouds had appeared over where the Mass Driver conglomerate Object had been, but no Object could be seen. However, it was visible through a different gap in the clouds. It was moving. And it was not moving away from Quenser and the others.

Quite the opposite.

It was approaching them.

(…What is it trying to do?)

Putting more distance between them should have been best for the Mass Driver conglomerate. After all, the Baby Magnum would have no chance of fighting back.

Meanwhile, Quenser noticed circular holes of blown away clouds in various places across the GPS map. They showed where giant explosions had occurred. They were all in areas between the Mass Driver conglomerate Object and Quenser's unit.

(Early detonations…?)

The sound of firing the shells caused a tremendous roar, but Quenser had not heard any. It was possible they had been fired while his hearing was still gone.

(Could the shells not withstand the tremendous speed of Mach 25?)

Naturally, the faster the shells flew, the greater the air friction. Quenser could not even imagine how much heat would be created at Mach 25.

In that case, it may have been approaching to a distance where it could be sure to destroy its target.

And why was that?

Because this was not a modern battle between Objects where the enemy would overlook you if you raised the white flag. If the Mass Driver conglomerate did not finish off its enemy while it had the advantage, they would be at the disadvantage as they were on the run and would have difficulty receiving supplies. The Legitimacy Kingdom military had plentiful resources, so they did not have to worry about that. With time, they could even have more Objects sent in.

Even if it carried a risk, the Mass Driver conglomerate had to destroy their enemy when they had the chance.

If that was the enemy's objective in approaching, the Baby Magnum had no chance of victory.

Just after having that thought, Quenser's body stiffened.

He had realized something.

If the enemy was planning to destroy the Baby Magnum with

certainty, what would their first action be?

Quenser could not get up, but he still desperately grabbed for his radio. He removed the bone conduction headphone leaving him in complete silence. He ignored that and started moving his mouth.

“Run…”

He was not speaking to anyone in particular.

He was speaking to everyone in the Baby Magnum’s maintenance base zone.

“Ruuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuunnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn!!”

Someone who was trying to utterly destroy an Object would never ignore the base zone that was filled with the materials and people that repaired it.

That railgun possessed the accuracy needed to score a direct hit on a quickly moving Object, so hitting a stationary base zone would be no problem at all.

And…

The Mass Driver conglomerate did not follow the rules of war or possess a human conscience.

The railgun shell mercilessly flew toward the base at Mach 25.

Something was blown away, a shockwave spread out, and Quenser’s body was blown up into the air.

Quenser had no way to know how many people had managed to escape the base.

The impact of the shockwave knocked Quenser unconscious.

All the while, the Mass Driver conglomerate Object continued to approach at a few hundred kilometers per hour.

Part 8

It sounded like someone was shouting his name.

It felt like someone was lightly shaking his body.

The first thought that came to Quenser's mind was surprise that his eardrums had not burst.

The even more obvious truth that he was alive came a bit later for some odd reason.

"…enser…Wake up, Quenser!!"

"…Uuh."

He opened his eyes and found Froleytia staring down at him rather than Heivia. Her hair was covered in mud and her always perfect tight military skirt was in complete disorder. A few of the long narrow kanzashi-like hairpins were missing.

"What…happened? …Where's Heivia?"

"I don't know."

"…?"

Quenser was confused as he thought Heivia was right next to him, but then he looked over to the side. He was utterly astounded.

The land was gone.

Just before, that area had been a relatively flat plain, but now the ground had crumbled away, leaving a cliff right in front of him. The newly made pit was over 10 meters deep and a large amount of earth, sand, and rock had crumbled down and piled up below.

The area beyond the cliff had not simply sunk down 10 meters. If so, water from the coastline would have come in and submerged it.

As the area beyond the cliff had sunk, the area Quenser was on had rapidly risen. The ground itself had crumbled.

He had no idea if anyone had been in the area that had collapsed.

It was just as Froleytia had said.

(It hit the base which is about a kilometer from here. If the landscape itself crumbled an entire kilometer away…)

“Wh-what happened to the people in the base…?”

“It would be best not to see.” Froleytia shook her head. “But that isn’t to say it’s some horrible situation where there are bodies smashed to pieces so much you can’t tell how many people were killed, so don’t worry. It was nothing worse than some broken bones. Fortunately we fled into the sturdy base rather than outside.”

“What do you mean…?”

“It was not a direct hit.” Froleytia sighed. “Either there happened to be some damage to the shell or it was a manufacturing error. It must not have been able to withstand the air friction, so it exploded in the air before hitting. Do you know about the meteor that fell in a place called Tunguska? A 100 meter meteor exploded due to air friction before it reached the ground, but the shockwave was enough to wreak havoc on the area. This seems to have been something similar. There would be a crater if it had hit,” explained Froleytia. “Mach 25 is a ridiculous speed, so the heat from friction has to be quite something. A normal metal shell would melt and lose its shape in an instant. Most likely, their shells have some kind of special cooling system inside to prevent the shell from melting. Maybe liquid nitrogen.”

“So did the shell crack due to the extreme change in temperature?”

“Possibly. You can likely tell from the aftermath on the GPS map, but the Mass Driver conglomerate Object actually fired more shells than arrived here. About half of them exploded before reaching us. This main cannon of theirs may be a prototype.”

“…It has that much power without even hitting?”

Quenser felt a chill run down his spine.

Even nothing more than the aftereffects caused destruction on the level of a tactical weapon.

“But the Bright Hopper was destroyed in a single shot from 500 kilometers away. The Baby Magnum was only 50 kilometers away. Shouldn’t it have been easier to hit?”

“It may have just been luck.” Froleytia hesitated for a second. “But we know the enemy’s shells use a high-angle trajectory. They are shot high into the sky so as to aim for their target in a parabolic trajectory. It is possible the shell has to be fired up to a set altitude

regardless of the distance to the target. If so, the parabolic arc must be more steeply curved the closer the target is. That may have led to the shells breaking up in midair for the princess."

It made a certain amount of sense.

But…

"If that's true, that Object has even less reason to approach. In fact, moving further away would allow it to more safely and more surely destroy the princess."

"It does not need to use a high-angle trajectory," replied Froleytia immediately. "The Mass Driver conglomerate cannot be resupplied, so they want to keep this short even if it is more risky. Heading forward and targeting the princess with a direct line of sight will end this much more quickly. Just before the base zone was destroyed, I saw the data on the damage to the princess. She will have difficulty participating in a high speed battle like that, so if an undamaged Object arrives, she will be unable to resist."

A railgun shell's speed was directly linked to its power, so the closer the target, the more destruction it could cause. If one of those Mach 25 shells was fired from close range, the princess's Object would not fare well.

Quenser audibly swallowed.

He recalled the huge explosion from earlier.

"Will she be okay? Even the shockwave from a failed shot is enough of a threat…"

"But that shockwave is not enough to be decisive against an Object that can withstand a nuclear weapon," said Froleytia. "Since the Mass Driver conglomerate Object has not continued with a second and third wave, its main cannon must have relatively little ammunition. They are on the run, so they may not be able to resupply whenever they want. They want to finish this while they have the advantage and they do not know if a chance like this will come again, so they have no choice but to approach. If they get close enough to take out the princess's Object, she will not be able to escape."

Froleytia placed her hand on Quenser's shoulder.

“I am calling off the mission. I hate to admit it, but we have completely lost our ability to fight. We have no choice but to accept it. From now on, we should focus on evacuating with as few losses as possible. The wounded will be loaded aboard the hydrofoils and escape to the sea. You get aboard one as well. We are retreating for now. We have little chance of winning in this situation. We need to get far away from them and reorganize.”

“…”

“I will search for the missing soldiers up until the very last second. …The princess has not been found either. She is not even responding to our transmissions. I doubt she had ejected from her Object, so she might be trying to fight somewhere, but we cannot locate her via satellite due to the chaff missile.”

“No.” Quenser forced his battered body to speak. “It may be true that we can escape a land-based Object’s direct attacks if we head out to sea, but the assault landing aircraft carriers that will pick us up move so slowly. I doubt we can escape that Object’s main cannon.”

“I know that. It accurately blew away the Bright Hopper at a distance of 500 kilometers. And that was against a Second Generation Object that was moving at hundreds of kilometers per hour. It might be able to hit a slowly moving ship at even greater distances. We have no guarantee that all the shells will break up in midair.”

“Then…”

“I said the injured would head out to sea in the hydrofoils. I never said they would be meeting up with the Charlemagne,” continued Froleytia in a bitter voice. “Since the hydrofoils keep most of the boat above water, they can exceed speeds of 100 kph. If all of them spread out as much as possible, that should keep the losses down to a minimum.”

“But what about the Charlemagne…?”

“Unfortunately, their fleet is not mine to command. They will have to decide what to do for themselves. …A few hydrofoils should be left aboard the ships, so I hope they decide to abandon ship.”

Quenser could tell Froleytia was gritting her teeth a bit.

It was her unit's fault that the fleet had been brought into such danger. She may have been feeling the weight of that responsibility.

"Luckily, a fleet under the command of the Legitimacy Kingdom flagship Sigmund has been deployed to the Atlantic Ocean about 700 kilometers away for a different mission. I'll have them retrieve us even if that leaves me in their debt. That is best."

"Best…? But will even half of us survive that? And we don't even know if the hydrofoils have enough fuel to make it 700 kilometers…"

"I know it isn't a pleasant option." Froleytia scratched at her hair with one hand. "But there are no pleasant options here. This is the best option available to us. If we stay here on land, the Mass Driver conglomerate Object will eventually approach. The best way to escape a land-based Object is to head out to sea. …Even if that leaves a high risk of being sunk."

A heavy silence fell over the area.

What Froleytia was telling him to do was turning tail and fleeing.

"Can you stand?"

"Ow!! My right ankle…"

Quenser grimaced as he tried to slowly walk. He looked down to find the area around his ankle inflamed and swollen. He could not freely move the joint.

Froleytia crouched down and checked his leg.

"It isn't broken. It looks like just a sprain."

"Th-that's great."

He could manage to slowly walk while dragging his leg along, but he could hardly run at full speed.

Froleytia silently took Quenser's arm and wrapped it around her neck to support his weight.

"F-Froleytia?"

"Didn't I tell you I was searching for the missing soldiers until the last possible moment? You're one of those."

It seemed she intended to take him all the way to the hydrofoils at the beach. Not only had he sprained his ankle, but the plain's ground had been split to the point of creating a huge height difference. The terrain of the beach may have changed considerably from the way Quenser remembered it.

Just as they set off, an electronic tone sounded from Froleytia's uniform. She pulled out her radio with her free hand and brought it to her ear. Since they were pressed together, Quenser could hear the voice coming from the radio.

It was a female voice he did not recognize.

"This is Corporal Bilany Saronno of the front lines scouting unit of the 52nd Mobile Maintenance Battalion."

"?"

"She's at the bottom rungs of Major Halreed Copacabana's unit. They head to the battlefield before the Object to gather intelligence and set the foundation for the base," explained Froleytia.

That meant they had been left with nothing to do after the Bright Hopper had been incapacitated. If they had headed to the battlefield first, they might be nearby and hoping to be picked up by an assault landing aircraft carrier.

However, Corporal Bilany's view betrayed Quenser's expectations.

"We have managed to contact the Baby Magnum of the 37th. We propose that the most effective means for us to survive is to work together to destroy the Mass Driver conglomerate Object. Unless we do something about that main cannon and its tremendous range and power, we cannot even flee."

"How is the Baby Magnum and its Elite, Lieutenant Milinda Brantini?" asked Froleytia.

Without hesitation, Bilany replied, "The Object is hidden in between two mountains. We have no idea how effective it will be, but she has predicted the Mass Driver conglomerate's movements and seems to be planning to keep multiple mountains between them at all times. It seems the predictions were made based on analysis by Private First Class Heivia Winchell."

"Thank goodness. So both the princess and Heivia are okay for

now," said Quenser in relief.

"Given the emergency situation, I hope you will forgive us for proposing a strategy to Baby Magnum without going through you first. We should have done this earlier, but may we propose the same plan to you, Major Froleytia Capistrano?"

"Go ahead," Froleytia responded.

"Currently, the damage taken from the enemy railgun has left the Baby Magnum with three of its main cannons unusable and with damage to its propulsion device that will make a high speed battle difficult. As such, we recommend that the Bright Hopper's standard tactics be used instead of the Baby Magnum's."

"You mean targeting the enemy's feet and then striking with a main cannon once the enemy has been stopped?"

"Yes. But since we do not have the high speed movement expected for such a plan, we will only get one shot. Assume that there will be no way to recover if this fails." Bilany paused for a second. "The Baby Magnum will hide at the site of an abandoned alpine vegetation mass production plant in the Iguazu district. It can use the ruins of a hemispherical facility used for regulating atmospheric pressure. We have confirmed that it contains enough space for the Baby Magnum. If a low-stability plasma cannon is fired through the wall when the Mass Driver conglomerate Object passes nearby, it can be destroyed."

"But how are you going to keep it in place? A surprise attack makes these complex and complicated actions less likely to succeed."

"There is a large dam in the Iguazu district where your unit is deployed, major. Also, we have received no word that the Mass Driver conglomerate Object can travel over water without swapping out parts."

Quenser had a bad feeling deep in his gut about what was to come.

But before he could say anything, Bilany smoothly continued.

"By destroying the dam, the area downstream will be temporarily submerged. That should be enough to keep a land-based Object in place. If the Baby Magnum fires during that time, the Mass Driver conglomerate Object should be unable to avoid it."

Froleytia was used to calmly planning and carrying out war strategies, but even her breath caught in her throat.

“…Are you serious?”

“Of course.”

“I cannot approve that method. Destroying the dam will not merely submerge the battlefield. Tens of thousands of civilians downstream would be sacrificed. I cannot have my unit participating in an operation like that!!”

“This is within acceptable bounds. Those are not people of the Legitimacy Kingdom.” Bilany’s tone of voice did not change. “I repeat, destroying the Mass Driver conglomerate Object by any means necessary is our best chance of surviving this. We are at war. I would hope a major who is commanding troops would be more aware of that fact.”

“Dammit!! Either way, the destruction of the dam will be meaningless if the Baby Magnum does not act. What you are doing here will accomplish nothing!!”

“I could say the same thing to you, major. We are carrying out this operation regardless. If you do not want those sacrifices to be in vain, I suggest you have the Baby Magnum play its part. I will contact you again once we have a timetable for the operation.”

With that, Bilany ended the transmission. Froleytia clicked her tongue in aggravation.

“Tch!! Our best chance of surviving this!? They just want to get revenge for their commander!!”

“She said they proposed this to the princess and Heivia, but did they really agree to this?”

As if to answer Quenser’s question, a different transmission arrived.

“I finally got through to you. I’m been trying to contact you this whole time, dammit. I don’t know where you ended up passing out, but don’t get blown away where I can’t see you.”

“Heivia?”

“I know this is a bad time, but could I discuss something with you?

The Bright Hopper's unit is forcing some ridiculous proposed plan on us. I honestly don't know what to do."

"We've already heard about that," cut in Froleytia. "It's the plan to destroy the dam, right? As your commander, I order you to take no part in this operation. As originally planned, we will focus on retreating by sea. If the Baby Magnum does nothing, the Mass Driver conglomerate Object cannot be destroyed. Once they realize that, they should realize that destroying the dam is meaningless."

"…I hope you're right," said Heivia in a strained voice "It looks to me like they only want to get back at them for destroying the Bright Hopper. All logic has left their heads. They might blow up the dam regardless of what we do. …Unless someone stops them by force."

"…"

That was the exact fear Froleytia herself had voiced earlier. She had surely realized Bilany and the others from the front lines scouting unit had lost their cool.

"Hey, Quenser. Back to what I want to discuss. I may be about to ask something crazy of you. Will you hear me out?"

"I was just feeling a desire to have a serious chat about this with you. But it seems there's not much left to discuss, so I guess I'll stick with you on this one."

Quenser and Heivia then spoke at the exact same time as if they had arranged it ahead of time.

"I'll do something about the dam. However, stopping the dam from being blown up won't finish this, so can I leave the Mass Driver conglomerate Object to you?" said Heivia.

"I'll take care of the Object. However, that means I can't do a thing about the dam, so can you stop the operation to blow it up somehow or other?" said Quenser.

The discussion was over after only 10 seconds.

Ending the transmission, Quenser looked over at Froleytia.

"…Froleytia, I have one request."

"No, I cannot help you with this." She immediately cut him off.

“The retreat by sea is indeed a poor bet, but your plan is much too reckless. Especially since leaving the Baby Magnum here will give some hope to Bilany Saronno’s group. Also, I cannot think of any real way to destroy the Mass Driver conglomerate Object in this situation and I doubt you can either. I cannot let you do something so reckless.”

“Yes, but…” said Quenser, sounding a bit discouraged.

He then removed his arm from Froleytia’s shoulders. A dull pain ran through his sprained and swollen ankle, but he still took a few steps away from Froleytia.

“Then I really will ask for only one thing. Please report that you did not find me after that bombardment. I am a battlefield student. Whatever I do here will not affect the life of a soldier like you, Froleytia.”

“Quenser, you…”

“Please let me go,” said Quenser as his ankle throbbed with pain. “The only reason I came here was to learn about Objects. This is not my job. But even so, I cannot bear to just retreat. Saronno’s group is planning to blow up that dam no matter what. If the Mass Driver conglomerate Object settles here, we have no idea how much cruelty and violence will occur in this government-less blank area until an Object from some world power arrives to blow it away. We have no idea if any civilians were harmed when those shells broke up in midair. …Someone has to do this, and we are the ones standing here. I don’t know whether I should call it fortunate or misfortunate, but we are here!!”

Froleytia silently listened to his words.

She thought, looked down, chewed on her lip, and then looked away from Quenser.

“No, I can’t go along with that. I am the commander here. I am the one with the authority to give orders.”

“…!!”

Quenser suddenly became intensely aware of the plastic explosives in the bag on his back, but then Froleytia continued speaking.

“I could not find Quenser, so I had no choice but to continue my

search. That is what I will go with. I will have the assault landing aircraft carriers ensure all but one of the hydrofoils evacuate. Will that suffice?"

"Froleytia?"

"What can you do with that ankle? If you aren't at your best here, you'll be killed," continued Froleytia with an awkward expression. "Once I have decided to do something, I go all out and take every option into consideration. And if that means I have to act as a crutch for an incompetent subordinate, so be it. In Alaska, Gibraltar, and that Oceanian military nation, you showed your ability to destroy an Object as a flesh-and-blood soldier. I would like to see that skill firsthand."

Part 9

"Quenser, do you have your survival kit?"

Froleytia was asking about the small set filled with medicines for first aid and tools meant to acquire and prepare food in the wild.

Quenser searched through the pockets of his military uniform.

"Are you going to fish for a quick meal or something?"

"The items in the survival kit have been designed so they can be used for more than acquiring food." Froleytia checked the contents of the small box her subordinate had handed her. "In other words, they can be used to kill."

Quenser recalled how the princess had used the metal skewer meant for cooking to stab an enemy soldier in the gut back in Alaska.

"The skewer can be used for stabbing or throwing and the fishing line can be used to strangle or as a wire trap. Combine it with the weights and it can be used as a blunt weapon."

"What about the miniature fishing pole?"

"It works as a carbon fiber whip. It's more convenient than a knife in close quarters combat. It can take out the trachea or an artery in

a single strike."

Having explained herself, Froleytia armed herself with the "weapons" she thought she could use and then tossed the kit back to Quenser with only the first aid medicines remaining.

"Of course, once the commander is relying on things like this, the unit is pretty much done for."

She then headed back alone to the ruins of the destroyed base zone. She was hoping to find a military vehicle they could use to travel.

Quenser checked his leg, but he could still only manage a slow walk. However, he hardly had time to complain. If the Mass Driver conglomerate Object continued on it would blow everything away. Also, Bilany's front lines scouting unit was going to blow up that dam to stop it.

They both had to be stopped.

With that thought in mind, Quenser looked around the area. It would likely have been better to set his sprained ankle, so he was trying to find a branch or something. However, he found something else instead. Much to his surprise, he spotted a gun. It was a Legitimacy Kingdom military PDW.

(Was this blown from the base all the way here by that railgun blast? It's like a volcano erupted.)

The PDW was like a shortened version of a submachine gun, so it was only about 20-30 cm long. The gun was small enough that it was actually difficult to carry in both hands, but a complexly folded up stock was located at the bottom of the grip, so it would likely be difficult to fire one handed for someone with the arm strength and grip strength of Quenser.

So it could be used in the right hand or the left, it was made so the shell cases passed through the grip and fell out the bottom.

The magazine was inserted parallel to the barrel, so it could actually hold around 70 shots. The magazine was actually longer than the gun itself. It seemed to be made for a maintenance soldier who would never stand on the front lines. They wanted plenty of ammunition to stop any spies they might run into on the base.

Froleytia had said someone who had not finished their training

could not be given a firearm, but Quenser figured it was best to have as many weapons as possible in an emergency. For that reason, he hid the PDW in his uniform. He would never be able to defeat an Object with something like that, but he might run into enemy foot soldiers.

Froleytia then arrived in a military off-road vehicle. The body was horribly dented and it looked like it was barely running.

“Sorry about all this trouble I’m putting you through.”

“You’d better be. Afterwards, I’m putting you through a hell of giving me shoulder massages,” said Froleytia as Quenser climbed into the passenger seat.

However, she somehow seemed to be enjoying herself. She might have gotten over something.

The Iguazu district sloped upwards as one moved inland from the coast. The slope continued forever as if the entire continent was tilted.

“…It’s gotten a bit cooler.”

“That’s because of the change in elevation. The inland area is over 900 meters up. We’re still relatively low here, but the temperature should be even lower up at the dam Heivia is at.”

“With Antarctica, the Iguazu coast, and now this mountainous area, the earth’s temperature is really all over the place. Will global warming just cancel itself out in the end?”

As Quenser was chatting mindlessly, a transmission came in over his radio.

“Charlemagne to Froleytia. We doubt you are still planning to fight, but we have learned some things from the analysis of the Mass Driver conglomerate’s main cannon.”

“So how many people do you think have seen through that façade?” asked Quenser quietly.

“All of them, of course. Otherwise, they would have abandoned ship long ago given the situation. Legitimacy Kingdom troops aren’t that stupid.”

“I see,” replied Quenser tonelessly.

That must have been why the bridge of the assault landing aircraft carrier sounded so happy.

“Froleytia to Charlemagne. We have a general idea that the enemy’s main cannon fires a railgun using a large scale high-angle trajectory. It uses the clouds created by the chaff missiles to reflect the locking signal from the sky in order to accurately aim in this mountainous region. If you have any information beyond that, I would like to hear it.”

“The enemy main cannon seems to actually be a combination of a railgun and a rocket. First the giant shell is fired by the railgun and immediately afterwards, the shell splits into three parts. This focuses all the kinetic energy on the center rocket, accelerating it further.”

“So it’s like a tank shell. Then the real shell must be rather small.”

“Just before hitting, ten or so smaller shells made of tungsten or something spread out in a ring shape. That must come from the interception missiles from the age of the Aegis ship. That is supposed to ensure the destruction of the target even if there is a slight targeting error, but it does not seem to be too effective. It fails to spread out properly more often than not.”

“Even so, if even one of those smaller shells hits…or if you are even in range of the blast, you will be instantly killed.”

“At least it isn’t using any kind of bacterial weapon,” commented Quenser.

“Also, about the high-angle trajectory of the shell,” continued the Charlemagne. “Its trajectory is rather unusual. Unlike the parabolic arc of a thrown ball, it travels to a point almost directly above the target and around 2500 meters into the sky, and then rapidly descends.”

“Is it forcibly changing its trajectory using tail fins? That’s less a high-angle trajectory and more a dive bomb,” added Quenser.

“That may be an attempt to more consistently avoid any objects in the way in a mountainous area. However, that sudden curve will create tremendous inertial force. They must have wanted to make this dive bombing a reality even if it presented the risk of having

the shells break up in midair," said Froleytia.

"We analyzed a video of launch, but no tail fins were seen. The small trajectory corrections are likely carried out by changeable grooves on the side of the shell or by intentionally damaging the side of the shell with special explosives to alter the frictional forces. However, we would need to analyze an actual sample to know more. …And that is only if there was enough left to analyze," continued Charlemagne. "After splitting apart to concentrate the kinetic energy, the shell finally accelerates to the monstrous speed of Mach 25 by firing the rocket engine at the bottom. This seems like one of the world's fastest prototypes. If it was launched from an already accelerated aircraft, it would probably set a record for the greatest instantaneous speed."

"What about the cooling system? It has to have some kind of system to deal with the issue of heat from air friction," asked Quenser.

The Charlemagne controller responded, "It seems to have a complete cooling system that uses liquid nitrogen. Its effective time seems to be directly linked to the distance of the target. The premature detonations when it attacked your base seem to be due to an error in the cooling system causing the shells to melt."

"So is that contrail-like line you see after it fires due to evaporated nitrogen?"

"While we might find a way to use this to our advantage, even when the cooling system fails, it still causes such a massive explosion. It seems avoiding the Object and keeping it from finding you would be the best strategy."

"I see. I will take that into consideration," said Froleytia politely before ending the transmission.

She put both hands back on the wheel and looked forward before saying, "A mass driver, rockets, and the cluster technology of Aegis ship ICBM interception missiles. …This really is the monstrous weapon you would expect of a space development conglomerate. I have commanded units against Objects for a long time, but I have never seen anything that attacked like that."

"With the method of aiming by reflecting off the clouds created by a chaff missile, this really is no normal layout. Whoever came up with this has to be rather eccentric."

“As a future designer, are you jealous?”

“I’m more worried about my life right now. If that main cannon was beyond the prototype stage, we would have been completely wiped out.”

“It may be a bit soon to be using the past tense. If it gets close and targets the princess directly, she will be defeated. She will have a

hard time evading at high speed with the damage done to her Object."

As usual, the princess was in grave danger.

And her survival was directly linked to the survival of the rest of the unit.

Quenser fell silent, and Froleytia spoke to him as she pressed down on the accelerator.

"Now that we have officially confirmed the existence of the Object, we need to give it a tentative codename. It would save us some effort if the Capitalist Corporations would share their official information with us, but I doubt they would be willing. Maybe we should call it Break Carrier or something like that," muttered Froleytia.

Break Carrier, the one that carries destruction.

That unpleasant name was perfect for that giant spherical body with the ridiculously high output railgun twice as long as it was. Quenser was not exactly pleased with the cynical naming.

"By the way, do you have an actual plan?" asked Froleytia.

"I'll get the princess's help. That would be fastest."

"Oh, you're relying on someone else from the get-go?"

"Bilany Saronno may be crazy, but the general form of her idea is good: hide somewhere the enemy can't see you, and destroy the Mass Driver conglomerate Object in a single strike. That much is a good plan." Some of Quenser's focus was taken by the pain in his ankle. "To do that, we have to know what route the Object will take. Thanks to the chaff missile, we can't use the satellite surveillance network. We need to give her a location and have her fire on it, and we need to prepare for that."

As he spoke, Quenser took out his handheld device. The GPS map was still covered in clouds, so the details could not be seen. He switched modes and called up an offline map filled with data. That display showed the area better, but it was just like a paper map in that it showed no real time information.

"If the enemy is just going to pass through the canyons between

mountains, it has more or less 3 routes it can take."

"We don't need to check out all of them," quickly concluded Froleytia. "We can figure out its general direction via sound. The Object cannot hide the noise it makes. Let's stake things out at the center route. If we hear it coming from ahead of us, it's going through the center route and if we hear it from the right or left, we know which other route it is taking."

Froleytia stopped the off road vehicle in a thicket just off the road and they covered it in fallen branches and dried grass to hide it. Quenser and Froleytia left the camouflaged vehicle and headed for the mountain slope. Since the Object had sensors and radar, it would be safest to distance themselves from the mass of metal that was the off road vehicle. Since a single shot would be enough to blow any kind of armor away regardless, they didn't have to worry about defenses.

The mountain was over 500 meters tall, but they did not have to climb all the way up. They just had to stop somewhere high enough to hear the noise of the Object but where the Object would not notice them if it passed by, so they stopped a few dozen meters up.

The dark soil at their feet was damp and it seemed to be expelling thick hot air.

The slope was covered in foliage, but it had a manmade feel to it. The plants were likely there due to forestation rather than there naturally. There were a lot of short coffee and fruit trees. They were all sorts of plants that were useful to people.

(Did people replant trees after continually destroying the mountains for the mines?)

Quenser and Froleytia hid down in the plants and sat next to each other.

Quenser operated his handheld device with both hands.

Froleytia peered in from the side and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Oh, just bookmarking this. The mountains around here have a lot of tunnels through them for the mines and for transportation. I thought putting the maps of all those a click away might be useful."

"Well, keep it short. If the Break Carrier picks up on the signal, it

will all be a waste."

Quenser frantically cut the device off from the internet. He made sure the bookmark in the military database could be accessed by everyone in the battalion and switched it off. With a bored expression, Froleytia watched Quenser's panicked actions and took a sip of water from her water bottle.

Their ambush was set.

The wind blew a bit and the short trees rustled around them. The crying of an unfamiliar bird echoed. The slope was more dark soil than it was green, but it also had concrete in places. They were the entrances to tunnels. Apparently, a lot of iron ore was buried there, but the map said that mountain had also been scheduled to have a geothermal power plant built on it. However, he could not hear any sounds of people working. The project may have been shut down due to financial troubles or something.

All they had to do was await the coming of their enemy, but that enemy was the monstrous weapon that had ended the age of the nuclear missile. The intense pressure seemed to increase with each second that passed. Quenser almost felt charging out while yelling at the top of his lungs would be preferable to just waiting.

"This waiting is nerve-wracking. Maybe that's why my throat is so dry. Quenser, I don't care what, but we need to start talking about something to get my mind off this."

"Please don't say that like some company boss demanding her employee show off some hidden talent."

"You're just a student, so don't act like you know what you're talking about. What a boring guy."

Froleytia sighed.

Quenser munched on a flavorless ration.

"Come to think of it, I did hear that you're a noble, Froleytia."

"Nn…"

Froleytia seemed hesitant to reply to that comment.

Quenser thought he had brought up something he should not have,

but then Froleytia nodded.

“The Capistrano family has an attractive – and rather famous – characteristic. It is really mainly suited to nobles. I suppose it would not sound all that valuable to a commoner.”

“A characteristic…?”

“We are a male family. No matter who we marry or how the child is made, the child has almost 100% odds of being male. It does not matter much to commoners, but in noble society, that is quite important. Especially when it comes to matters of succession and inheritance.”

It was well known that the royal and noble societies were highly biased toward men. Whether the ruler of the kingdom was male or female could create major changes to the very era itself, but the fact remained that kings were much more common than queens.

Froleytia commanded multiple units be it locally or remotely, but that was usually a job for someone with a rank higher than a major. Regardless of what she actually did, it was possible there were those who did not wish to give her a higher official position. There were those who did not view being protected by a woman as a virtue.

“As a commoner, does it seem rather trivial to you, Quenser?”

“Well, I suppose. The social standing for both men and women is relatively equal for us. Also issues of family or bloodline don’t quite click in my mind. It seems to me that people should be able to marry whoever they want. …Well, I am just a kid, so I guess even the idea of marriage doesn’t seem real to me.”

“I see. I’m jealous,” replied Froleytia offhandedly. “At any rate, my family has that characteristic. Whoever we marry and however the child is made, it is almost assured that a boy will be born.”

“??? You say males are born with almost 100% odds in your family, but you’re pretty clearly female.”

“That’s what makes me so attractive.”

Quenser did not understand what she meant by that.

It must have shown on his face because she laughed.

“I am a female noble who has an almost 100% chance of giving birth to a boy. Men who want to leave a male heir but have not been able to desperately want someone like me. After all, if they do not create an heir, their family will die out and their assets will be forfeited. By having negotiations related to having children, the Capistrano family can have the advantage while speaking with noble families so influential they would normally be well out of reach. Those other families want to borrow my womb no matter what.”

“You mean…like a political marriage?”

In a West European island nation, a king had split the country apart from a worldwide religion in order to leave the queen and marry his maid, but examples like that were the exception. In the Legitimacy Kingdom, nobles preferred to marry someone of a lineage of equal or greater standing to their own.

“Even if it is officially treated as marriage, I would be nothing more than a tool used to solve their problem of creating an heir. Due to the pride of nobles, the womb has to belong to a girl of the same social class as them.”

Quenser had thought his commander had a relatively angry personality.

However, Froleytia was thinly smiling at that moment.

Was there something different about that problem?

What had it taken to extinguish the raging flame that usually lived within her?

Wasn’t her family supposed to protect that flame and ensure it was not extinguished?

“But it could be worse. For a noble heir, it is best for both families to have legitimate bloodlines and personal histories. If that was not the case, it would not get as far as a political marriage. I might end up with a revolving door of men wanting male heirs coming for me. After all, we already have mountains of requests coming in wanting a surefire chance at a male heir.”

Froleytia had said that the Capistrano family created males with almost complete certainty and that she was the irregular girl born to that family.

That meant she certainly had brothers who could carry on the Capistrano family. Since her family was looking for the best possible terms, they were in no rush to marry her off. Her political marriage was not something that the family felt a pressing need to do. Since the issue of the family's succession was already taken care of, her marriage was nothing more than a means of extending their power.

If it was something absolutely necessary, she might not have been able to make an excuse to get out of it even if it turned out to be a tragedy. However, not even consolation from that fact could be heard in Froleytia's voice.

Even in the Legitimacy Kingdom that had influential royals and knights, that type of story was not often heard.

It seemed the Capistrano family was especially cold to women.

That may have been due to the family being almost entirely men.

Or perhaps it was because their lack of women led them to feel a need to construct a world where men had the advantage.

"But anyways…At some point, the rumors gained some strange embellishments. I have heard that the daughter of the Capistrano family will give a male heir even to the most impotent of men or that the daughter of my family is so good in bed that powerful nobles are desperately seeking her out. Besides those selfish people worried about an heir, some horrible dilettantes have also set their sights on me. Now even old men who have long since lost the ability to perform and horribly perverted men have joined in this auction to see who gains the right to have their way with me."

Quenser had gone well past the point of being at a loss for words.

He had happily thought that nobles had their own worries and problems to deal with, but this problem was so much greater than anything he had imagined.

"That is why I prefer being out here on battlefields rather than in a safe country. If I leave the military, all that is waiting for me is the #1 candidate and a large bed. It would probably be some old man who I have never seen before in my life. …Remember that Halreed Copacabana man who piloted the Bright Hopper?"

"Yes…"

“He was the #3 candidate or thereabouts. Depending on how the situation regarding money and conditions developed, he might have ended up in the #1 spot. There are around 10 official candidates, but he was probably on the kinder side of those. Some of the candidates only want me to give birth to a proper heir while some want to try some Russian roulette-like game where they give me multiple partners and see whose child I give birth to.”

That was more than enough to make Quenser grimace.

That example was simply too extreme to compare. Then again, an example that extreme may have been necessary to show how Halreed qualified as one of the “kinder” marriage candidates.

Quenser could not imagine just how twisted their view of a family was compared to his as a commoner.

“When his Object was more or less destroyed, I was actually relieved. Maybe there is something wrong with me. After all, losing one or two means nothing because there is a line of other candidates waiting behind them.”

The person before Quenser’s eyes was an 18 year old girl.

She had not come to the battlefield only recently like Quenser or Heivia. He had wondered before when she had first arrived on the battlefield.

Now he really wondered when she had.

How long had she been hiding on the battlefield in fear of the auction selling off her very own body.

It was not about love. It was not even about lust. How much had she suffered in that situation where she could be dragged off to a bed at any time in order to carry out her function as a means to assuredly produce a boy.

“Well, don’t get so uptight,” said Froleytia indifferently. “It isn’t like I have no way out of this. If it was that bad, I wouldn’t have brought it up so easily. Basically, I just have to keep fighting on the battlefield until I am some old woman who has lost her value as a woman. …Well, even then there might be some people seeking my body to leave an heir for their family. It may be that I will have the most freedom in my life if I both live and die on the battlefield.”

Quenser did not know what to say.

He could sense that this was not a situation where he could get by with cheap words.

Froleytia would probably smile and ignore it as the opinion of a child, but Quenser knew he could not let himself hurt her like that.

So instead of trying to console her, he muttered his honest thoughts under his breath.

“(…Y’know, Froleytia smells really nice.)”

“To say that after what I told you, you really are some kind of genius.” Froleytia’s eyebrows moved up slightly in surprise. “Wait, be quiet.”

Quenser pricked his ears up too.

He could hear it.

A low rumbling was coming from the distance. It sounded something like approaching thunder clouds. It was the sound of the type of Object propulsion devices that used static electricity to hover the giant 200,000 ton form off the ground. It seemed the enemy Object used the same type of propulsion as the princess.

Yes.

The Mass Driver conglomerate Object was approaching.

“Where is it coming from?”

“I can’t tell. The sound seems to be echoing through the mountains…”

Quenser concentrated even further in an attempt to determine where the noise was coming from. If they misread which of the three routes the Object was taking, the Baby Magnum would be in danger. With the power it had, the enemy’s railgun could destroy the other Object even if it had to fire straight through a mountain.

The direction the noise was coming from was…

Part 10

Heivia arrived at the Iguazu Dam.

The foliage was much thicker there than at the coast where they landed. It seemed more of the trees were natural than not. The solid plants with large leaves that were characteristic of tropical countries grew thickly around the area. Heivia had the feeling the area was crawling with giant rhinoceros beetles.

However, that noble heir had not come there to catch bugs.

He looked at the dam.

It was 40 meters tall, about 30-40 meters across, and slightly curved out from the reservoir lake. Supposedly, it could store over 800 million tons of water. That water that had been blocked from its natural flow would cause great damage to the natural world if it was let loose.

(Dammit. There are already off-road vehicles parked here!!)

Heivia carefully looked around the area as he ran while crouched down.

The Baby Magnum and the princess were not there. He had asked her to go help Quenser and Froleytia. He had had two reasons for that. First, the Object could easily destroy the dam on its own, so she would be dangerous help when it came to protecting the dam. Second, he had made a joke about Quenser getting along well with Froleytia and the princess had fallen into a very bad mood.

(…Oh, god. It doesn't matter how many lives you have, fighting alongside an Object piloted by a distracted Elite is just too dangerous. It's 100 times better to just do it on my own.)

Heivia held up his rifle and ran so as not to shake his upper body. When he arrived, he pressed up against the wall next to the door into the dam. Other than the dam itself, there was a facility that opened and closed the flood gates, a facility that checked on the water quality, a facility that held the hydroelectric turbines, and more. Heivia was approaching the flood gates facility.

The door was unlocked.

That actually made him uneasy, but he still slowly opened the door and cautiously entered. Just inside, he spotted two workers tied up. The fact that they had not been killed must have been a way of

showing that killing was not their intention. However, the massive amount of water released when the dam was blown up would likely kill them anyway.

Heivia concisely told them that a group was trying to blow up the dam, that he had to stop it, and that they shouldn't panic. He then cut their ropes with his military knife. He told them to evacuate to the mountainous region. Just to be extra safe, he told them to climb up higher than 100 meters.

(…This sure is selfish of us. I'm working with Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers to fight Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers.)

He very nearly spat out that comment, but instead headed for the stairs leading to the higher levels of the dam. On the way, he munched on a cookie the old coffee plantation couple had given him.

(Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers fighting each other is ridiculous, but I at least have to pay them back for these cookies.)

As he moved, he contacted Quenser via radio.

"Hey, Quenser. I sent the princess your way. I made sure she was in a wonderful mood, so could I ask you some things?"

"The Object might be able to detect our location from the radio signal, so keep it short."

Heivia did not know much about explosives, so he wanted to get some advice from Quenser.

"In movies, blowing a small hole in a dam is enough to have the entire thing crumble from the water pressure. How do things work in reality? Is one of those clay-like bombs enough to destroy the dam?"

"It is true that the water pressure might destroy it once a hole is opened, but putting a crack in walls thick enough to hold all that water would take quite a blast. There's an easier way."

"?"

"Dams deteriorate and they will be scrapped if the repairs can't keep up. They're made to later be demolished. They create several bypasses, use several small dams to hold back the water, and blow

away a few premade checkpoints in the empty dam to demolish it. A few dozen years ago, the issue of dam deterioration came to the forefront and they started being made like that," explained Quenser.

Heivia frowned.

"How many checkpoints are there and where are they?"

"It depends on the design of the dam. If you check the control room or find some documents…no, wait. If they kept that information where someone could easily find it, it could make a terrorist attack easier. It's probably hidden deep down in the construction company's offline database. And there won't be any obvious signs."

"You're useless!! How am I supposed to protect an unknown number of points at unknown locations!?"

"Whether there are 20 or 30 of these checkpoints, I think all of them have to be destroyed to demolish the dam. For safety reasons and to help with repairs, the checkpoints will be in the places where any single one can support the dam. That way the dam won't collapse if one is destroyed. In other words, you just have to find one bomb and cut the cord so it won't detonate. Then you just need to defend that point to stop Bilany Saronno's plan."

"This bomb isn't going to be some complex monstrosity like in the movies, is it?" Heivia clicked his tongue. "So I have to search at random. I can't do a single thing if the bombs are detonated before I find one. I just wish I knew exactly how many there were."

"How about you jam them?"

"You mean use a jamming signal? What for?"

"A massive amount of water will be released when the dam is blown up. I doubt Bilany and the others are opting for a noble death, so they'll get far away and high up before blowing up the dam. In that case, they'll be using a radio signal to detonate the bombs, right?"

"I see." A powerful smile appeared on Heivia's face. "In that case, I can buy time without knowing how many there are."

The top portion of the dam making a gentle curve along the reservoir lake was like a giant castle wall. When Heivia grabbed the railing and leaned over, he spotted something like clay attached to

the center of the thick wall.

It was a bomb.

Perhaps to regulate the destructive force, a number of bombs were set up in some kind of pattern. Something like a metal sheet was set up on one side of the bombs to focus the blast on the dam.

The area of the wall looked no different from the rest of the wall, but since the plastic explosives were set there, that had to be one of the checkpoints.

How had Bilany and the others known where the checkpoints were?

They must have had some kind of data on the dam. Or perhaps they had gotten someone who knew to talk.

(Shit, how did they get those there!? Did they tie a rope and jump down like in some action movie!?)

However, he could jam the detonation signal to the bomb, so it would not explode. That just left confronting Bilany's unit…

"Wait a second," muttered Heivia all of a sudden.

A thin bundle of cords extended from the bombs attached to the side of the dam. It was not just a meter or two long. The long cord hung down to the bottom of the dam and then continued on into the thick forest.

"Shit!! They're doing a wired detonation!! Now I can't jam it!!"

Heivia frantically held up his rifle, but then he stopped. There were two types of cords for wired detonations. One was a normal cable that sent an electric signal. The other was like an old-fashioned fuse. A fire was set that caused a small explosion in the plastic explosives fuse which detonated the explosive itself.

The cable type would be no problem, but the old-fashioned fuse type held a risk of catching fire if he severed the cable with his rifle.

But at the same time, the bomb could be detonated at any time with the cord connected. He did not have time to sit around thinking.

Suddenly, Quenser's voice came in over the radio.

"Fire!! Don't worry. That's a cable for an electric fuse!!"

“How can you tell? It isn’t something you can tell just by looking!”

“The old-fashioned fuse type is used like a timer. It’s just like dynamite. The plan here relies on perfect timing between the flood caused by the dam and the Baby Magnum firing, right? They need to be able to blow up the dam at any time in order to get the perfect timing. Why would they use a fuse that can’t be changed once it’s lit!? This has to be a cable for an electric fuse!!”

“!!”

Heivia brought his rifle back up, aimed it straight down, and pulled the trigger.

Multiple bullets flew and one of them severed the bundle of cables. The bombs did not explode. Quenser had been right.

Now that the cables had been severed, the detonation signal could not be sent to the bombs.

However, there was someone who was not pleased with that.

A female Legitimacy Kingdom soldier had come back up to the top of the dam to set bombs on another checkpoint.

(…Is that Saronno from the front lines scouting unit!?)

“!!”

“!?”

At that moment, Heivia and Bilany Saronno were at the entrances near opposite ends of the gently curving dam. The two leapt into the doors at almost the exact same moment and stuck only their rifle barrels back out.

Multiple streams of gunfire rang out.

(Dammit, she’s actually pretty good looking!! I don’t want pretty girls turning their guns on me! Why couldn’t she have been so hideous she was hard to look at!? Although while I’m at it, I might as well wish she was downgraded to a guy or even a Martian.)

Meanwhile, he could hear multiple voices coming from his radio. Since Bilany’s unit was from the Legitimacy Kingdom too, he was picking up their transmissions.

“Corporal Saronno, we’re headed your way. Do we need a rocket launcher?”

“We need to get the signal in to detonate the bomb. After taking out Private Heivia Winchell, we just need to reconnect that cable.”

“Circle around from the other side. Meet up with another group and head up the stairs. We’ll catch him in a pincer attack.”

“If necessary, we can treat Private Heivia Winchell as a traitor for getting in the way of our operation, so do not hesitate to shoot him. Continuing the operation takes top priority.”

“Dammit!! Why does everything have to be such a pain in the ass!!” shouted Heivia.

Heivia leaned just a bit out from the door and aimed at a soldier at the bottom of the dam who was aiming a rocket launcher at him. The rifle bullets struck the ground near the soldier. He had not shot him in the head or chest, but that may have been due to the fact that he was a fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldier was affecting him more than he thought. The soldier’s aim was thrown off in shock and the rocket flew off harmlessly.

When Bilany and the others saw that, they increased the intensity of their firing. Heivia frantically hid behind the building, but then he heard footsteps coming from below the stairs.

(We’ve all received the same training, so is this a case where the winner is decided by numbers!?)

Meanwhile, the female soldier who was likely Bilany called out.

“Private Heivia Winchell!! Lay down your weapon and surrender!! It is not right for fellow Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers to be fighting each other!!”

“(Liar!! She was clearly fully intending to kill me!! Does she not know I can hear their transmissions!? Dammit, she’s both clumsy and a tsundere. This is making it harder and harder to kill her!!)”

“What will you do!? If you do not respond, I will take that silence as your answer!!”

A temporary calm from the gunfire accompanied Bilany’s voice. She may have been giving him his last chance to announce his

intentions. Heivia had a feeling he might end up full of bullet holes depending on his answer.

Whatever the case, he was cornered.

If he was attacked from more than one direction simultaneously, he would have no way of dealing with it. If more than one explosive weapon like a rocket launcher or grenade were used against him, he could do nothing about it.

Heivia gave the issue serious thought.

(I only have one chance at victory.)

“Corporal Bilany Saronno!!” He shouted back. “The Baby Magnum has already gone to help the battlefield student named Quenser who is studying with the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion! She has not gone to the remains of that abandoned alpine vegetation mass production plant as you suggested!! If you blow up the dam now, it will accomplish nothing!!”

“Is that your final answer!? If you do not prove you no longer intend to fight, we will be forced to shoot you!!”

“That’s not what I mean!!” Heivia shouted forcefully. “Your plan is to destroy the Mass Driver conglomerate Object with one of the Baby Magnum’s main cannons, right!? Then what about this? If Quenser and the others destroy the Object before you blow up the dam, you will no longer have a justifiable reason to cause that flood!!”

“That’s…!?” Bilany trailed off, but she gathered her thoughts soon thereafter. “How are we supposed to trust you!? That monstrous weapon destroyed the cutting edge Bright Hopper in a single blast from 500 kilometers away!! Are you saying a mere student will take out something like that!?”

“…Yeah. I am!!” Heivia replied without hesitation.

He abandoned the option of giving up peaceably and pulled the trigger to a deadly battle once more.

“So I need to buy him enough time to do it!! I’m gonna be firing like crazy, so don’t mess up and get yourselves killed!!”

Part 11

Quenser and Froleytia hid behind the short trees on the mountain slope.

They could hear multiple sounds.

They could hear the sound of the leaves of the trees rustling and they could hear the sound of large, richly colored birds flying through the sky.

However, those sounds seemed to be forced away by another sound.

That was the sound of an Object travelling in the distance.

Quenser and Froleytia strained their ears to pick up exactly where the low, echoing noise was coming from.

“Is it coming from the right route?”

“Sounds like it.”

The echoing made the noise sound like it was coming from every direction, so it was difficult to pick up on the precise direction. However, when they listened closely, similar noises were slowly building up in order. The direction they heard it from first had to be the direction the Mass Driver conglomerate Object was coming from.

They had only one chance.

If they chose the wrong route and failed in their surprise attack, no one could stop the advance of the Break Carrier.

Baby Magnum and the rest of Quenser’s unit would be slaughtered, Bilany and her unit would blow up the dam, and countless civilians would be sacrificed downstream.

Froleytia grabbed her radio.

“It seems the princess is headed our way. She wants to know which of the three routes to lie in wait along. I’m going to tell her the route to our right, is that okay?”

“No…”

Hearing that, Quenser stood up in a sudden realization.

He called up the offline map on his handheld device.

“Something isn’t right. We’re surrounded by Object noises. This isn’t just an echo.”

“?”

“…It’s Baby Magnum,” muttered Quenser in a daze. He looked back toward Froleytia. “Both the Baby Magnum and the Mass Driver conglomerate Object use static electricity to hover off the ground! Baby Magnum is approaching to prepare for its attack, so the sound of both Objects approaching is mixing together!! The noise we’ve been hearing was not just the Mass Driver conglomerate Object. We were hearing a mixture of both Objects, so we can’t accurately determine the direction from this!!”

In a normal room, a human would be able to distinguish between two noises coming from two different sources.

However, if the noises were almost identical and then echoed again and again and again, no one would be able to tell the accurate source of the noises. They had no hint.

Sounding impatient, Froleytia said, “We have no time! If we let it get too close, we won’t have time to hide and prepare for the surprise attack. If it spots the Baby Magnum, the Mass Driver conglomerate Object can just fire that high power railgun straight through the mountain!!”

“But we can’t do anything if we can’t tell which way it’s coming from.”

Quenser thought for a second and then raised his head once more.

There were three possible routes and there were two of them.

“Let’s split up,” suggested Quenser immediately. “We’ll both wait at separate routes. If the Mass Driver conglomerate Object passes by one of us, we’re set. If it doesn’t pass by either of us, we know it’s taking the third route. We’ll be sure to know which route it’s on that way.”

As he spoke, Quenser manipulated the offline map. The mountain slope they were currently on was along the center route. A geothermal power plant had been scheduled to be built on that mountain, so a few tunnels had already been dug. A tunnel just a bit up the slope led straight through to the other side of the mountain which was the left route.

After a short silence, Quenser said, “Froleytia, you head through the tunnel. Equipment for construction of the power plant should be there. According to the data I have, one of those is an electronic slide lift, so it should only take a few minutes to reach the other side of the mountain.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll stay here.”

That was partially due to his sprained ankle. However, he secretly also wanted to send her to the left route because it was the least likely route for the Object to take.

However, Froleytia shook her head.

“No, I can’t approve that. With that ankle, what are you supposed to do if the Object passes by? Even if it doesn’t notice you, the shock of it passing by could cause a landslide. You could be killed needlessly just because you can’t move. I can’t allow that.”

“Ha ha. I had a feeling you’d say that,” Quenser laughed weakly.

Even standing was painful, so he sat back down on the mountain slope.

He rubbed at his swollen ankle and asked Froleytia, “Sorry, but I’m about at my limit here. It might help with the pain if I set it so the joint can’t move. Could you grab that thick branch over there?”

“Honestly…”

Froleytia turned in the direction he pointed in, but she could not see a branch.

With a puzzled look, Froleytia turned back toward Quenser.

“Hey, Quenser. Where is this branch you-…?”

Froleytia trailed off.

Quenser was nowhere to be seen.

She could only hear a slight crunching noise a bit away. Then she realized what had happened. Quenser had rolled down the slope to get away from her. By heading for the center route himself, he was forcing her to head to the left route.

He would be easier to spot on the flat path at the base of the mountain as opposed to hidden in the forest on the slope.

And that was likely exactly where the Object would pass through.

Quenser had put himself in unnecessary danger to force her hand.

(That bastard…!!)

Froleytia gritted her teeth, but it was too late. Even if she headed down after Quenser, it would be difficult to drag him back up. The Mass Driver conglomerate Object would pass by while she was trying.

She had no choice.

She headed for the tunnel about 10 meters up from her current location. She could teach that insubordinate youth a lesson afterwards.

Part 12

He slid down a few dozen meters.

The fact that the slope was primarily made up of soft black soil, the fact that the slope was not too steep, and the fact that his military uniform was relatively durable all worked in his favor.

Quenser managed to survive.

However, he was not unhurt.

He was collapsed at the base of the mountain. Even with the previously mentioned factors in his favor, pain ran through his entire body. His uniform was designed to have a certain level of

durability, but it now had scratches and tears all over it. The mountain slope had not been smooth, so painful scratches from dirt and rocks covered his body.

(Dammit…!!)

He tried to stand up, but pain ran through his leg. This was not the leg he had sprained. Now he could use neither of his legs. He could no longer move from where he was.

(That doesn't matter. I'm lucky enough to have survived. Even if I could run, it wouldn't be enough to escape an Object. As long as I can get the location of the Mass Driver conglomerate Object to the princess, it doesn't matter. I just have to focus on that.)

He tried crawling along with just his arms, but it was no use. Luckily, there was a thicket nearby, and the angle was such that he might be hidden by it.

Had Froleytia made it through the tunnel and to where she could check on the left route?

Where was the princess's Baby Magnum?

Was Heivia still fighting at the dam?

Many questions floated up in his hazy mind, but then he heard the sound of the Object even louder than before. It was the approaching thunder cloud-like sound of massive amounts of static electricity being produced to make the Object hover.

(It's coming!!)

It took him a few seconds to realize why the sound was so much clearer than before. The answer was simple. He was hearing the sound directly rather than with a mountain in between, so it sounded much louder and more distinct.

Which meant…

(It's taking the middle route!! This is the one!!)

As Quenser had that thought, a group of large birds took flight from the nearby mountains. Afterwards, a mountain-like form filled his vision.

It was the Mass Driver conglomerate Object.

From what he could see, there was nothing stealth-like about its design.

The reason the Legitimacy Kingdom's Second Generation Bright Hopper had not seen it until the Bright Hopper was destroyed was likely due to the mountainous region. The 900 meter mountains had hidden the Object's giant form and the iron ore in the mountains had lowered the accuracy of the radar. And they had used a meteorological weapon on top of that. It was possible they had produced something like a manmade fog to cover the area between mountain peaks like a lid in order to hide the Object from satellites. The Mass Driver conglomerate was experienced with anything related to space development, so they likely had the knowledge and technology needed to enact numerous countermeasures.

Quenser looked up and gulped as the giant weapon drew near.

The Break Carrier.

Its spherical body was supported by three leg-like parts. The ends of those had ski-shaped planks attached to slide smoothly over the ground.

The most noticeable feature was probably the giant cannon attached to the right side of the Object. Near the end of the 100+ meter main cannon, it was supported by two leg-like parts similar to a sniper rifle's bipod. It was probably so large that it would bend under its own weight if not supported.

At the back of the main cannon was a rotating part similar to a revolver. However, giant magazines stuck out from five evenly spaced points to the sides of the cylinders.

The shells must have been stored there.

A normal magazine would have been too large, so the design was made more complex in order to split the magazine up.

From the size of the barrel and magazines, it likely held around 25 shots.

Elsewhere, the Object had giant missile launchers attached. Missiles were exceedingly rare as Object armaments, but these were likely for the chaff missiles used to reflect the targeting signal. And their number matched the estimated number of shells.

However, this meant the Object had the ability to assuredly destroy 25 Objects from a distance of over 500 kilometers. If the liquid nitrogen cooling system was used at full ability and the top altitude reached in the parabolic arc was altered, it might even be able to reach 1000-3000 kilometers away. Also, if it had the ability to replenish its supply of shells mid-battle, it could continue fighting even longer. This meant the Mass Driver conglomerate had a legitimate ability to announce their ownership of a certain area.

Quenser audibly gulped once more as he stared up at the giant form.

He then realized the enemy's threat was not just in the form of long distance bombardments.

(The barrel can extend and retract like a police baton? They can strengthen or weaken the voltage to freely change its power. Is that so if an enemy Object does get near it, the length of the cannon can be reduced to lower the inertial force and allow it to fight at high speed!?)

The Charlemagne had said the Break Carrier's shells broke apart shortly after being fired in order to focus the kinetic energy on the smaller core and increase its speed.

However, it was possible they could use that in a different way for close- or mid-range battles.

They could keep the shell from breaking apart so the entire mass struck the enemy Object. The outer armor would be crushed and the sharp inner core would shoot out and pierce the target's armor. Normally when the barrel was shortened there would be less space for the electricity to affect it, but the shells could switch modes as well to maintain the main cannon's great power.

At long distances the dive bombing shell was used and at closer ranges it was fired directly.

By having multiple ways of firing built into a single cannon, the Object could use its power to its fullest from various ranges.

However, making the system so complex may have caused the malfunctions. A few of the shells fired at Quenser and the others had exploded in midair before reaching their targets.

(Where is the princess…?)

Thinking that, Quenser grabbed his radio. The Mass Driver conglomerate Object was definitely taking the middle route. If he passed that information on, the surprise attack had a much higher chance of succeeding.

But then Quenser frowned.

The radio would not turn on. No matter how many times he pressed the button, it did nothing.

It had broken as he fell down the slope.

“Shit!!”

He had the information, but he had no way to pass it on. Meanwhile, the Object continued on to pass right by Quenser. Their surprise attack would fail at this rate. Baby Magnum and the rest of the unit would all be slaughtered.

(Dammit, isn’t there anything I can do!?)

As he cursed in his heart, Quenser pulled out the PDW he had hidden in his uniform. It was a gun about 20-30 cm long that was a bit like a shortened version of a submachine gun. Its 9mm bullets were plenty to kill a soldier, but were of course not enough to pierce an Object’s armor.

Something fell out of his pocket as he pulled out the gun.

It was a clear plastic bag filled with homemade cookies. He had gotten it from that coffee plantation.

Quenser tossed one into his mouth and removed the PDW’s safety.

(…I know I can’t defeat an Object with this.)

He aimed the gun at the Object’s spherical body.

Still collapsed on the ground, Quenser put his finger on the trigger.

(Please don’t let them figure out what I’m doing. It’s all over if they do.)

There was only one thing he could do: pull the trigger and shoot the Object.

The dry gunshot spread throughout the mountainous region.

The Mass Driver conglomerate Object seemed to notice something had struck its armor. However, it did not seem worried. Of course it did not. A mere 9mm bullet could not destroy the lens of the targeting cameras linked to the Object's cannons, much less damage the armor.

Even so, the Object stopped moving.

The action felt similar to someone stopping out of annoyance because a small bug was flying around their head.

Quenser pulled the trigger again.

He let loose a small burst of 2 or 3 bullets. Sparks flew from the armor, but no real damage was done.

The Object's cannon moved.

It had located him from the sound of the gunshots.

Rather than the giant metal bridge-like main cannon, this was one of the smaller ones. Quenser recognized it. It was the same as the spare cannons used for the anti-tank position in Antarctica. This was likely their intended use. Even if it was the smallest cannon on the Object, it was still quite a large railgun. A shot from it could bend an Aegis ship in half, so there was no need to say what it could do to Quenser.

Quenser fired some more, but then suddenly stopped. He wondered what the Object thought about that. Did the pilot Elite think he had run out of ammunition or that he had realized it was doing no good?

Neither was correct.

The Object may have even realized the truth.

The railgun aiming at Quenser did not move any further. It was possible the computer aboard the Object or the Elite's brain was analyzing the gunfire.

If they were doing that, they might realize that there was regularity to Quenser's gunfire. If they realized it mapped to a certain information transfer code made up of simple 1s and 0, they would find the following message.

Object.

Middle route, point 391.

Passing by.

Low-stability plasma cannon.

Prepare immediately.

The Mass Driver conglomerate Object had over 100 weapons both large and small, and each of those had targeting cameras attached. The sound of the lenses focusing came from all of them at once. The other sensors were likely activating as well.

However…

Part 13

At that moment, the princess and the Baby Magnum were waiting along what Quenser and Froleytia had designated the right path. This was simply because it was the only place the giant Object could hide.

The Baby Magnum was hidden in the valley between two mountains. The valley was a few dozen meters deep and the arms of the main cannons were the only things sticking out.

While waiting there, she heard gunshots with a certain regularity to them.

The princess immediately realized what it meant, but she did not have time to move to the other route. The Mass Driver conglomerate Object would suspect a surprise attack and therefore have its sensors and radar searching for an enemy in all 360 degrees around it. It was only a matter of time before it found her. If it did, it could fire its high power railgun while ignoring the mountain between them.

However…

The princess had no reason to wait.

“…”

She called up all information on the surrounding terrain and searched for the layout of all the tunnels through the mountains.

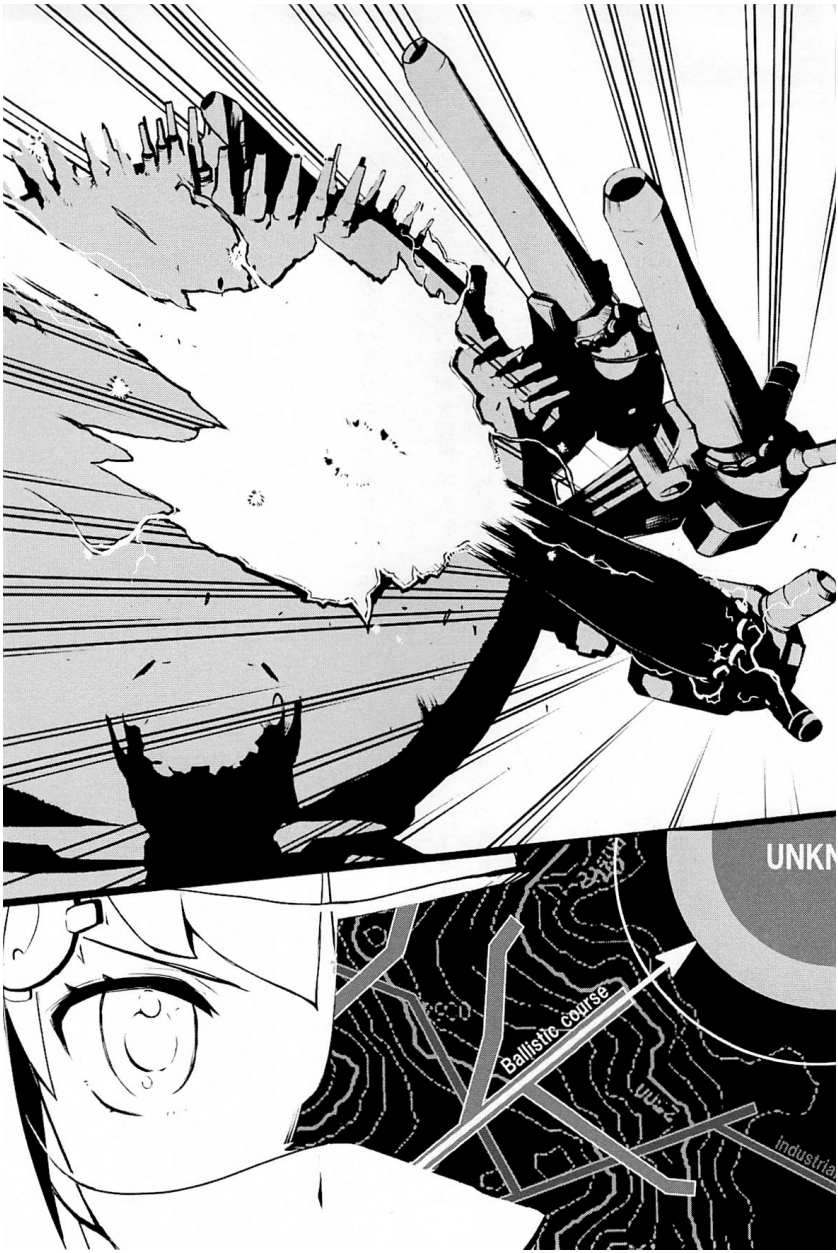
The mountains had complex networks of tunnels through them for transportation, construction, and other uses.

However, the vast amount of information in the military database also meant it would take some time for the data she wanted to be displayed. Even a lag of a few seconds could change the outcome of the battle with the Break Carrier.

However, the princess took no time at all.

This was not simply because of her excellent information processing ability as an Elite.

It was primarily due to Quenser having searched for the maps of the area in the military database and bookmarking them such that the entire battalion could immediately access them. The princess had no way of knowing it, but it was after doing that that he had slid down the mountain slope.



Skipping past the usual searching time, she immediately called up the data she needed.

(Time to finish this.)

In other words…

There was a straight tunnel leading from where she was, through

the mountain, and to the coordinates Quenser had given.

(I will not let you chase after Quenser and the others any further.)

She had no reason to hesitate.

One of the main cannon arms turned in the correct direction and the princess accurately fired the low-stability plasma cannon into the tunnel.

Part 14

The flash of light was visible even from the distant Iguazu Dam.

Heivia was utterly cornered, but he narrowed his eyes at the bright flash and shouted into his radio.

“You saw that, didn’t you, Corporal Bilany Saronno!?”

“…!!”

“That was a giant firework blessing our victory!! Contact the Baby Magnum if you want! Actually, an explosion that big probably blew away the chaff missile clouds!! If you don’t trust the word of our princess, you can ask the satellite observation operators!! They’ll probably tell you only horrible wreckage remains!!”

The gunfire stopped.

The front lines scouting unit intended to blow up the dam to cause a giant flood of water downstream and stop the Mass Driver conglomerate Object. The Baby Magnum would take that opportunity to shoot the enemy with one of its main cannons.

Bilany and the others really only wanted to get revenge for the destroyed Bright Hopper, so any justification would have worked for them. However, this would stop them.

After all, the Object they wanted to take their revenge out on no longer existed.

“This is Baby Magnum. The enemy Object has been destroyed. The

battle is over. I repeat, the Object has been destroyed."

The transmission from the princess reached all of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers in the Iguazu district.

As Bilany stood there in a daze, Heivia shouted at her.

"Did you hear that!? The dangerous Object was destroyed!! This dam was never ours!! I'd like to get out of here before its owner gets back, but what are you going to do!? If you want to drown yourself in alcohol, I'll keep you company. Would you rather compete with strong drinks or lead bullets!?"

Part 15

It was not simply an explosion.

The trees in the area were torn down and Quenser's body flew through the air. The Mass Driver conglomerate Object's armor plates were torn off and flew in every direction with amazing speed. The fragments rained down over the mountain like a fragmentation grenade.

The low-stability plasma cannon had mercilessly pierced straight through the center of the Object.

The reactor had exploded from within and the 200,000 ton mass of steel had been blown to pieces along with a tremendous shockwave. However, that was the last thing Quenser saw. A tremendous flash of white light swelled up and temporarily robbed Quenser of his vision. He could hear a low rumbling noise, feel something powdery falling on his face, and just barely tell that dust and dirt was billowing into the air as landslides occurred in various places.

He had somehow survived.

Both his legs hurt and he could not stand up, but the only thing in his mind was surprise at his own survival.

Suddenly, someone grabbed his back collar and pulled. He was dragged upwards. As his vision slowly returned, he realized Froleytia stood before him. It seemed she had been the one to grab

him.

Her face was covered in anger.

Quenser was shocked and she spoke in a low voice.

“The next time you give so little regard to your own life, I will kill you. Understand?”

“Froleytia?”

“Understand!?”

“Y-yes, ma’am!!” Quenser replied and Froleytia removed her hand from his collar.

Quenser fell back to the ground and she looked up into the sky.

“Then let’s head back. The assault landing aircraft carrier has sent a helicopter to come pick us up. It seems everyone wants to speak with the person most responsible for this victory.”

Part 16

The Baby Magnum had received heavy damage.

Three of the arms that moved the main cannons had been destroyed as well as much of the armor. It was not clear if the base zone would be enough to repair it all. It was possible it would have to be sent to a military manufacturing plant for repairs.

The propulsion device had also received damage, so the maintenance soldiers had attached the sea floats and were slowly taking it to the sea.

Meanwhile, the princess received a transmission. It was from Heivia.

“Honestly, we took quite a beating again today. What happened to the peaceful battlefield we were supposed to have?”

“…If it was peaceful, it would not be war,” she replied.

“Oh, is that how the Object-piloting Elite has viewed it each time?”

(What is he trying to say?)

The princess looked puzzled.

Heivia then said, “We did manage to destroy the Mass Driver conglomerate Object, so things here are resolved. But do you see anything about this that doesn’t quite make sense?”

“…”

The princess thought for just a second.

She did.

A question had resided in the back of her mind from the moment the Bright Hopper had been destroyed, and it had yet to be resolved.

“The Mass Driver conglomerate Object headed toward our base zone from a position 50 kilometers north of us. In that case, where was the Object that powered the spare cannons that bombarded us during the landing?” asked Heivia.

Yes.

That was the question.

They had not found the Object that had powered the spares with its reactor. Only the thick power cables had remained on the coast.

Of course, an Object could travel at hundreds of kilometers per hour, so it was possible the one Object had gone 50 kilometers north after supporting the attack on the coast and then headed back south.

However…

(That would serve no purpose…)

With a main cannon that could destroy the Bright Hopper in a single shot from a distance of 500 kilometers, there was no reason to do that. It would have been more effective to wait on the coast and target the Baby Magnum with its main cannon when Baby Magnum approached over the ocean.

Most likely, the spares deployed on the coast had been a test of the Baby Magnum's specs to see if it could be destroyed by the main cannon at a distance. If that was the reason, it was even more suspicious. There was no point in bringing that Object in close for a test against an enemy they did not know if they could defeat or not.

Which meant…

"So the Object supplying power to the spare railguns on the coast was a different one?" asked the princess.

"Perhaps. Your Object is well equipped when it comes to radars, so I was wondering if you had seen anything odd."

"…"

The Mass Driver conglomerate.

It was possible they had another Object.

No one had been able to see this mysterious Object and it did not appear on radar or any other sensors.

Part 17

He had been lectured half to death.

A medic girl had suggested he be given a wheelchair since both his legs were injured, but Froleytia rejected the idea and headed straight into her raging lecture. He had been assaulted by her words for an entire hour within an officer room prepared aboard the assault landing aircraft carrier. At that point, Quenser started to wonder just how long it was going to continue, but then the lecture was suddenly cut short.

Froleytia's computer had received a video chat.

Quenser had no real intention of listening in, but an entire wall of the room acted as a screen for the computer, so he could see whether he wanted to or not.

The call was from a man wrapped in bandages and gauze.

His most prominent feature was his curly blond hair.

(Is he an injured soldier from our unit?)

Quenser quickly learned he was wrong.

“Major Froleytia Capistrano. I somehow managed to survive, so I thought I should inform you of that.”

“Major Halreed Copacabana. It seems both of us are quite tenacious.”

Quenser finally figured out who it was when he heard the name. He was the pilot Elite of the Bright Hopper and the #3 candidate for the assured heir from the Capistrano family.

Naturally, the situation was quite awkward for an outsider like Quenser.

This was not the same as hearing a conversation between lovers. Now that he knew that the noble men around Froleytia were only interested in her ability to assuredly give birth to a male heir for them, his feelings were darker and more unpleasant.

Froleytia had confessed to him that she had been relieved when the Bright Hopper had been destroyed.

Currently, she leaned back in her large officer’s chair and breathed a small sigh.

“Is that all?” asked Froleytia.

“No, I have something else to report as well.” Froleytia showed no emotion while Halreed seemed to be enjoying himself. “You know that I am the #3 candidate, correct?”

“Well, yes. I don’t really remember who the #1 and #2 are though.”

“You may not need to. As of today, I have been raised to the #1 spot.”

“…”

Even Froleytia looked shocked at that.

“It’s thanks to the Mass Driver conglomerate. The Capistrano family

has recognized my valor for continuing to fight for the sake of peace while faced with a dangerous Object-destroying enemy. They seem to have determined I am more useful than the #1 and #2 who are sitting around growing fat in a safe country."

"But…the Mass Driver conglomerate was…"

Froleytia glanced over toward Quenser. She may have wanted to say that, even if he had been violating orders, the credit for the victory should have gone to Quenser as well as the princess who had scored the finishing blow with the Baby Magnum.

However, Halreed did not seem to mind.

"Regardless of the specifics, I still took part in that battle. I guess I'm just trying to say that it was useful in garnering me a few points."

"I see…" Froleytia's voice held even less emotion than before. Perhaps because she had learned even better what kind of man she was speaking to. "But whatever position your candidacy is in, I regret to inform you that I cannot go along with a marriage. I have my role as a Legitimacy Kingdom soldier to carry out. Rather than waiting for some unknown point in the future, you should probably search out someone better to propose to."

"No matter how good a woman I found, it would all be meaningless if she does not come with a guaranteed heir. Any noble would know that." Halreed did not hesitate to speak despite speaking to the very person in question. "Also, it seems you were caught up in the front lines battle with the Mass Driver conglomerate. We can't have that. …You are to immediately return to the safe country and undergo a detailed examination. If your schedule does not allow for this, you can temporarily resign from your duties as a soldier."

"…!!"

This time, Froleytia's shoulders clearly jumped.

If she resigned from her duties as a soldier even temporarily, she would lose her justification for not marrying. She would lose any way of avoiding an unwilling marriage.

Before she could refuse, Halreed continued speaking.

"By the way, this suggestion was decided on by your Capistrano

family. I can't blame them for wanting to make sure no scars remain on your body. I may not be the one to join with you as another candidate may rise up first. But whatever happens, the preservation of that beautiful body of yours is essential for maintaining your value."

He spoke as if he was worried about a scratch on a piece of art.

It was clearly not how one would speak of a human.

(…)

Quenser gave the issue serious thought.

He was indebted to Froleytia for what had happened. If she had not carried him in the off-road vehicle after he had sprained his ankle, the surprise attack on the Mass Driver conglomerate Object may not have succeeded. That meant Quenser no, every soldier in the battalion…no, given the possible destruction of the dam, every single person living in the Iguazu district was indebted to Froleytia.

That meant he had to save her now that she was cornered.

It was a delicate issue between nobles, so it would not be easily solved. However, Quenser already had an idea where to start. Halreed and the other candidates were not after Froleytia herself; they were after a male heir of legitimate lineage. Halreed had said a lot himself, but since he had admitted the issue lay with obtaining a male heir, that was a necessary requirement for him. If he just wanted to have sex and make a child, he could just hire a prostitute. The reason Froleytia was so important was because she both had an almost 100% chance of giving birth to a boy and (as ridiculous as it sounded to a commoner like Quenser) she had the pure blood of a noble. They had an odd insistence in only marrying other nobles. It seemed the king of a Western European island nation had once split apart from a world religion in order to leave the queen and marry his maid, but such things were rare. They could choose whoever they wanted for mistresses, but their wife who would give birth to their legitimate heir could not be chosen so simply. Several requirements had to be met in order to convince those around you.

Which meant…!!

Quenser circled around behind Froleytia, reached his arms below her arms, and mercilessly grabbed onto her giant breasts.

“Wha-…!?”

Froleytia was so shocked her mouth flapped open and closed wordlessly. However, Quenser looked at the small camera atop the computer and twisted the corners of his lips up as he continued to mechanically massage her breasts.

“Sorry, Major Copacabana. To be completely honest, Froleytia is in

a relationship with me, a commoner battlefield student by the name of Quenser Barbotage. Ha ha ha. While she was kindly and carefully looking after me as a commander, we just grew closer and closer. If you're the #1 candidate, then sorry about that."

"Y-you idiot!! Th-that's not true. There's something wrong with hi-…ngh!? D-don't pinch there, Quenser!!"

Froleytia must have been rather panicked because she did not sound convincing despite telling the truth.

Halreed looked on in shock for a bit, but he finally started trembling. The trembling grew in intensity as time went on.

"…Y-you said you were a commoner. So…that means…Froleytia Capistrano, the daughter of a noble family, is committing adultery with a commoner…?"

"Adultery? Wow, now that's a word you never hear anymore," said Quenser who was a bit impressed. "Y'see, I knew it was wrong, but once Froleytia pushed me down and straddled me, I couldn't help myself."

"Bfh!? Wh-why am I taking such an aggressive role in your fantas… Nn!?"

"You're free to ask whatever questions you like." Quenser squeezed Froleytia's giant breasts to silence her denial and put on the most evil smile he could muster. "But if she was that important to you, you should've given her a chastity belt with your name on it. As things are, there was nothing stopping us."

What Halreed and the other candidates wanted was not Froleytia herself. They wanted the male heir of legitimate lineage she would give birth to. To be "legitimate" required more than simply being born of a noble.

In other words…

"…Heh…"

A laugh came from the monitor.

It was a thick laugh filled with something completely different from joy.

“Heh heh heh. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! I see, I see. So that’s it!!” Halreed said as if it had exploded out of him.

His confused mind had switched over to the gear of anger and restarted.

“Shit!! I thought something wasn’t right. So the reason you never returned from the battlefield was because you were too busy enjoying the guys there. Even if you can assuredly produce a male heir, the Copacabana family cannot have an heir produced by vulgar woman that opens her legs for anyone who comes along!! … How could this happen? Now I have to start over from square one. I am going to make sure the Capistrano family hears of this!!”

With a click, the video chat suddenly ended.

All that remained was Quenser massaging a pair of breasts and Froleytia having her breasts massaged with a pale look on her face.

(Good, good. If the story spreads, she won’t be treated like a source for a legitimate heir.)

“…”

Froleytia remained silent, but expressed her thoughts with her fist rather than words.

A great sound of impact exploded from Quenser’s cheekbone.

He fell to the floor such that his legs were bent back and to the sides. It was a very girly way of collapsing. Froleytia looked down at her young subordinate with a deathly cold expression.

“What am I to do? According to military regulations, I have the authority to have you shot. Now, where did I leave those bullets that fragment within the body? Those lovely bullets have a way of excessively opening the wound.”

“Oh, shit!! You aren’t just hiding your embarrassment! You’re serious!!”

“…Do you have something to say, Quenser? If so, this is your chance.”

“They were so big!! I couldn’t fit them in my hands!!”

“You have guts, I’ll give you that!! But I don’t want to hear any

complaints when I stomp on you!!!!!"

Froleytia had completely snapped, so she stepped down on Quenser's face. Meanwhile, Quenser began speaking in his defense.

"B-but!! You were cornered and didn't know what to do, right!? I didn't see any other way of resolving that peacefully!!"

"Do you not realize that what you did was more or less the same just on a smaller scale, Quenser!?"

"Yeah, but my plan was to soften the blow a bit. Y'know, make things softer."

He tried to respond honestly, but more weight pressed down on the heel on his face.

"In other words, it was the exact same thing!! And what do you mean soft!? You were squeezing pretty hard! And for what!? Halreed may have given up, but are you going to squeeze me from behind every time a candidate shows up!?"

"I-I…!! W-wait, grab those tits each time? That might be a good idea…"

"No, it isn't!!" As her boot dug into Quenser's face, Froleytia brought her hand up to her chin. "And if he really accepted that story, it means I coerced you using my position of authority… Wait, wait, wait! That means I'll be treated like an actual slut. What do I do? What I do?"

"Um, that's too much weight. Froleytia, that's too much weight. Your weight. That's way too much. You're crushing me. You're crushing me. You're boot is really digging in. I don't mind if you tread on me, but at least put some love into it!!"

After he let out that SOS of a shout, Froleytia finally removed her boot from Quenser's face.

As Froleytia breathed heavily, she brought her hands to her hips.

"Were you really that bothered by what I told in you on that Iguazu mountain?"

"Well, yeah. How else was I supposed to feel after hearing something that heavy? I think anyone would want to do something

to help after hearing that."

"I see."

Froleytia averted her gaze from Quenser.

She then muttered something under her breath.

"(…Wanting to do something to help, hm? That's something I haven't heard in a long time.)"

"?"

Quenser looked puzzled, but Froleytia did not repeat herself.

Chapter 3: In a Cavalry Battle, Destroy Your Opponent's Footing > > Total War in Amazon City

Part 1

Seven or eight assault landing aircraft carriers were travelling north through the Atlantic Ocean centered on the flagship Charlemagne. They were headed for the Amazon district of South America which was Legitimacy Kingdom territory. Their destination was the sea near Port Braganca just below the equator.

A young male maintenance soldier slowly walked across the flat deck while occasionally leaning over. He was checking the takeoff catapult to ensure it had not warped due to heat. It had of course been designed to take into account a certain level of expansion and contraction just like rails for a train, but it was crucial to be extra sure. If that catapult lost functionality, the assault landing aircraft carrier would lose its value.

The maintenance soldier removed his helmet and looked up at the sun in annoyance.

"Shit, I can't believe it's so hot when we're past Halloween. If we were given permission to enter port, we would have a plastic roof blocking the sun. This is a Legitimacy Kingdom port. They should let any Legitimacy Kingdom citizens in whether we're civilians or military."

As the maintenance soldier muttered, he heard the sound of the elevator. However, this was not the elevator of a high class department store where a young woman pressed the button for you. It was bringing up a small delta wing fighter. He could see the pilot waving from within the cockpit.

The fighter carried only one person.

That was likely due to the research for Object cockpit layouts being used. In that age, fighters were obsolete. With wars fought by Objects, military development was centered around them. All

weapons tended to be designed such that they could also be used for Objects.

The maintenance soldier heard the pilot's voice come over his headset.

"Quit complaining. Although I'll admit I would rather not think about the fact that the port has enough vending machines and stores for us all to have as many cold drinks and ice cream as we could want."

"As usual, you're covered in more jamming devices than missiles. Do you really need to be that worried? The enemy Object was destroyed."

"It's a habit. …And I didn't join the military to take part in dogfights. Do you think you could spare me the life saver and training wheels?"

"You're not the only one. These days, the entire air force is like that."

The maintenance soldier checked the catapult with measurement tools.

"With Objects implementing anti-air lasers, gaining air supremacy has lost its popularity."

"There is a plane paradise in Scandinavia where Objects are internationally banned from entry."

"There's no point in that though. It's like being an animal in a cage at the zoo," replied the maintenance soldier, sounding bored. "The modern job of the air force is to transport personnel and equipment, to perform low altitude reconnaissance when chaff missiles have made the satellites unusable, and for aerial acrobatics at ceremonies. Which is your specialty?"

"The acrobatics. When I was going through aviation school, I did hope to get into dogfights or perform precise bombings though."

"So you've been away from the battlefield for a while, hm?" The maintenance soldier took his eyes away from the measurement equipment and gave the success sign from the check sheet. "How does it feel nowadays?"

“I want to get a chance to actually do something, but I also don’t want to be stuck in a situation where I *have* to do something.”

Someone else was listening in on that radio conversation from elsewhere.

It was the Charlemagne’s captain sitting on the ship’s bridge. He cut off the frequency his subordinates used to chat and focused on the frequency used for official transmissions.

On the other end was Froleytia, the commander of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion that the Baby Magnum belonged to. She had headed inland to the Amazon district ahead of time.

Also on the channel was the commander of the Legitimacy Kingdom military base that protected the Amazon district.

“After losing their Object, the remnants of the Mass Driver conglomerate have moved north from the blank region and across national boundaries. Reports say they have entered the Amazon district which is our territory. Is that correct?” asked the captain to make sure.

The local commander replied, “We have not engaged in direct combat and have instead focused on evacuating the civilians from the general area. As a result, we allowed them to enter, but…”

That was when Froleytia cut in.

“Where is the Legitimacy Kingdom Object that protects the Amazon district? Our Baby Magnum was heavily damaged, so we would like to request a joint operation if possible.”

“Our Object, the Forest Roller, is undergoing scheduled maintenance. As for other units, one Object is undergoing emergency maintenance after taking heavy damage in a different operation and another is currently engaging a Faith Organization Object. We do not have any military force to spare for this problem. …Our Object was scheduled to be protected by the Bright Hopper while this maintenance took place, but it was destroyed in the previous battle. And ever since, its Elite, Major Halreed Copacabana, has insisted he return to the home country and refuses to listen to anyone saying otherwise.”

“Tch. Now that he’s been forced to wait, that dog is of no use.”

“?”

The captain frowned slightly at Froleytia’s strange comment. The local commander was likely making a similar expression. Froleytia ignored this and continued speaking.

“Understood. As originally planned, our Baby Magnum will deal with the remnants. However, we are not in prime condition either. The armor plates have been replaced, but the rest is not so easy. Three of the seven main cannons are unusable and the propulsion device was damaged, so it cannot carry out high speed battle.”

“Didn’t you gain supplies from the Amazon district base? They are both Legitimacy Kingdom Objects, so don’t they have the same standards?”

“N-no.” replied the local commander. “While the armor plates are interchangeable, the main cannons and propulsion device are almost entirely custom made. The equipment at our base is specialized for our Forest Roller. It is unlikely we can meet the needs of the Baby Magnum.”

“I know. That just means we have to do this as is,” said Froleytia.

She was unable to entirely hide her disappointment.

Her next statement seemed to be intended to sweep away that disappointment.

“Do you understand our situation now, Charlemagne? We would like as much military strength as we can get. We would like help from your fighters as planned.”

“I do not mind providing that.” The captain chose his words carefully. “However, we only have outdated fighters. They may not be able to keep up on this modern battlefield.”

“??? I thought the Mass Driver conglomerate Object had already been destroyed,” said the local commander in confusion.

The captain gave no clear reply.

(…I hope that’s the case.)

Some reactor had been used to provide the massive power needed for the spare cannons in Antarctica and on the Iguazu district coast.

That raised a question as to the number of Objects owned by the Mass Driver conglomerate.

Froleytia likely had similar doubts.

He heard her mutter, “Unconfirmed object X. If it really exists, things could get rough out there once more…”

Part 2

Quenser and Heivia were completely unaware of that dangerous conversation as they helped construct the maintenance base zone. So that it could be set up anywhere in the world, the Baby Magnum’s base was made up of a group of more than 10 large vehicles. By linking the vehicles together front-to-back and side-to-side, setting up block-shaped rooms on top in multiple layers, and stringing up wires to support the weight like with a tent, buildings could be quickly constructed.

The two of them were not helping with the construction of the buildings. They were carrying boxes of packed equipment into the empty buildings that had already been constructed. They were doing the same thing as movers.

While he walked down a hallway carrying a cardboard box, Quenser said, “How can we know the remnants of the Mass Driver conglomerate won’t escape while we’re moving this base along so slowly?”

Heivia walked along beside Quenser and occasionally glanced down at Quenser’s feet. Quenser’s sprain had healed, but he may have still been a bit mindful.

“If they do, the princess’s Object can move in to deal with them. From what I heard, they’ve started to build a base in the ruins of Amazon City about 20 kilometers ahead. Apparently, they hope to put up a counterattack here so they can cut off all pursuit before fleeing.”

“…What’s Amazon City?”

“The world’s biggest ghost town.” Heivia set his cardboard box

heavily down on the floor of a strategy room. “There are a lot of things in the jungle. Coal, oil, iron, gold, jewels, and a lot more. There were also people who planned to use the rare location to make medicines from special plants and extracts taken from insects. The Legitimacy Kingdom set up an entire mining city.”

“But you said it had become a ghost town, right? Did the project fall through due to economic issues?”

“It was nothing that cute.” Heivia turned back to the hallway after Quenser set down his box. “While the jungle was being mined, they ran across a horrible virus. Apparently, it completely overturned what we knew about immunology. In order to keep the losses to a minimum, the Legitimacy Kingdom completely abandoned Amazon City and pulled out.”

“W-wait a second. Isn’t that where we’re headed?’

“All of that happened 20 years ago. A research group wearing protective suits came in a while back, but they could find no trace of the virus. And if that virus was still wreaking havoc on the area, we wouldn’t have to go to all this effort. We could just wait for it to wipe out the Mass Driver conglomerate.”

“That’s right…” muttered Quenser, but he could not get rid of a strange feeling of unease.

Heivia entered a room filled with cardboard boxes and said, “Antarctica, that blank region, and now a city being swallowed up by the forest. Areas a lot of people have an interest in really do invite war. Ugh, what a pain.”

Heivia sat heavily in a large chair sitting next to all the boxes. It was covered in the plastic used for packaging, so they could not see it, but it seemed to be quite a nice chair.

“Hey, Heivia. If that’s an officer’s chair, you might want to get up. What if it’s Froleytia’s?”

“That Japanese-obsessed woman wouldn’t bring a chair like this into her room. And besides, my job is to analyze enemy Objects and yours is to learn about Objects. The problem lies with them for pushing this physical work on us.”

At that point, an unexpected new face arrived.

It was the Baby Magnum's Elite princess.

"Nn? Oh, it's here."

"?"

Quenser and Heivia turned toward the princess and she replied with no facial expression.

"That chair is to go in the cockpit."

"Seriously? These hard things at my shoulder blades are electrodes for a low frequency medical device, right? Is that what Objects are like these days?"

"According to the old lady, this is one method of ensuring my concentration does not drop during long battles."

"…And I heard you had a fridge and a microwave in there too," said Quenser in slight shock.

Heivia shrugged while still sitting in the chair and said, "That's quite the comfortable battlefield. How about you install a home theater system and a popcorn machine?"

He had meant it as a joke, but the princess seemed to take him seriously. She pulled a high spec handheld game system from one of her miniskirt-style pockets.

"I can watch anything I want with this."

"Dammit!! You can just do anything, can't you!? And do those headphones have a vacuum tube on them!?"

Both Quenser and Heivia had actually brought the same handheld game system along with their personal items, but they were unable to resupply with the latest movie disks each month. There was a way to purchase and download digital copies of the movies, but they were not allowed to use it over the military line.

Meanwhile, Quenser patted the plastic-covered chair with a low frequency medical device installed.

"I've never used a low frequency machine before. Do they really work?"

"Only one way to find out," said the princess as she moved Heivia

out of the way and removed the plastic.

She connected the power cable to a jack that connected to a normal household power outlet and plugged it into the wall.

“Should we really be doing this?”

“It is no real problem,” replied the princess, so Quenser went along with her suggestion.

Unlike a normal chair, this one had very low resistance, so it felt like his body sank into it and was fixed in place. He felt something hard that must have been the electrodes for the low frequency medical device against his back and legs. He began to wonder if it would really work over his uniform.

“Here goes.”

The princess pressed a few buttons on the chair’s armrest.

Immediately afterwards, a feeling Quenser had never felt before rushed across his entire body.

“Hohhhhhh nyaaahhhhhhh!? Ahh, anthahh…fnyahhh. Styop, styop. Wyait, thyis! Styop it, styop-… fnyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Quenser’s entire body started to pulsate unnaturally.

Heivia frantically pressed the stop button.

With bloodshot eyes, he shouted, “What the hell kind of noises were those!?”

“Don’t blame me!! Just try it! You try it too, Heivia!! You’ll be making the same noises! It’s completely involuntary!!”

Quenser pulled his body out of the low resistance material and Heivia took his place.

“You’re an idiot. A simple low frequency massage chair isn’t enough to get a reaction out of me.”

“Okay, switch on.”

“Kyawynn!? Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhnnnn!? Wai-… wyait, wyait jyust a second!! Quyenser, I thyink thyis myassage

chyair is syupposed tyo be used thyrough thye pryincess's syuit!! The byuttons of my uniform are vyibrating in syome weird places!!"

"See? This is no normal massage chair."

"I gyet it!! S-syo!! Dyon't turn up thyat switch! Fwooohhhhhhhhh!! Hyaaaaaaahh!!
Hehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

Private Heivia's body twitched in pleasure.

When the princess saw the disgusting mess of sweat and such the two boys had left on her chair, she slowly pulled out her radio and covertly spoke into it.

"…Medical team. I need you to discard one of the cockpit chairs ASAP."

Part 3

After they had carried all the boxes to their respective locations, Quenser gained a bit of free time.

Technically, that time was used to check on the wiring for the computers and radars, but that was a task for the specialists. There was nothing to do for the normal soldiers during that time.

Quenser parted ways with Heivia and headed to the supply area. He received a few flavorless rubber-like rations before running across Froleytia.

When she saw Quenser, a tremendous frown appeared on her face.

"…Do not stand behind me without permission. I am never allowing you to catch me by surprise again."

"Fair enough, but did you have any other ideas for getting yourself out of that situation?"

Quenser's shoulders drooped limply and the middle aged man at the supply area looked at him with a puzzled expression. Froleytia cleared her throat once and returned to what she had come there

for: obtaining a small container of shampoo. With that task complete, she left the supply area with Quenser.

As they walked through the passageway, she said quietly, “I would have a hard time coming up with anything else, but that doesn’t mean you can just do whatever you want.”

“Come to think of it, how did things go after that? It seemed that Copacabana guy gave up on the political marriage, but that’s all I know.”

“Right now, my perceived value has fallen by an amazing amount. There are still some old men who don’t care so much about an heir that are still sticking with it, though. Well, I wouldn’t be out here in this war if this could be solved so easily. You don’t need to worry about it.” Froleytia sighed and leaned her back up against a nearby door. “However, I’m also in a bit of trouble since my Capistrano family isn’t contacting me. Dammit. If I just out and out deny it, some of the candidates are sure to return, but everyone will treat me like a slut if I don’t do anything. I just don’t know what I’m supposed to-…”

Suddenly, Froleytia trailed off.

The door she had leaned against had already been half open, so she had pushed it the rest of the way open. It led to a small room used to store the design documents needed for maintaining the Baby Magnum. It was also the room Quenser spent a lot of time in studying as a battlefield student.

“Whoops,” said Froleytia.

She managed to avoid falling over, but she ended up stumbling two or three steps into the room. A bookshelf right next to the door was filled with training video disk cases. However, a single porn video was mixed in.

Froleytia froze in place as she read the title on the package.

It read: A Cool Female Soldier’s Secret Training of Pleasure and Tits

She fell silent for a bit while squeezing the Japanese-style kiseru in her hand.

“…Quenser, is this your personal preference?”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong!! I didn’t bring that here! I only grabbed you in order to help you! But why is that here!? That’s the video that was on the bookshelf in the ammunition storage when we were loading magazines!! Is it just really popular in the Legitimacy Kingdom military right now!?”

Quenser was met with a great mystery, but Froleytia did not seem to trust him at all. She was slowly backing away from him with the look of someone who was faced with a wild beast.

“…Umm, I’ll be going then,” he said.

“No, I have work to do as well. I cannot alter my schedule due to my personal feelings. I have no choice but to accompany you partway.”

And so Quenser and Froleytia started walking down the passageway once more. They were walking alongside each other, but they were keeping an odd distance between each other.

“So what is the plan for dealing with Amazon City?”

“So you’ve learned those ruins are where we’re fighting.” Froleytia sighed. “Around 500 people remain to the Mass Driver conglomerate. Previously, it seems the pilot Elite of the Object was commanding them, so their command structure has changed thanks to the Object’s destruction. With this change, the command has probably shifted to Sladder Honeysuckle. When the princess’s Object attacks the ruins of Amazon City, we need to make sure we at least kill him. Without him, the rest will not be able to put together a proper strategy. Then we can slaughter them in the confusion.”

“Who is he?”

“He has various titles. He is an Object designer for the Mass Driver conglomerate, one of the world’s leading investors, as well as a military advisor for the powerful president of one of the conglomerate’s companies.”

“…”

Quenser’s eyebrows twitched at the word “designer”.

However, he specifically avoided that and asked about something else.

“Military adviser?”

“The Capitalist Corporations take military actions at the approval of company shareholders. For this reason, they hire specialist strategist. The same goes for the Mass Driver conglomerate even if it has a different structure from the other companies.”

At that point, Froleytia fell silent.

Finally, she spoke quietly as if speaking of her own worries.

“This should be a simple task if we really are only up against a maintenance base that has lost its Object. But…”

“I’ve heard the rumors.” Quenser frowned. “You’re talking about the possibility of a second Object that was powering the spare cannons in Antarctica and on the Iguazu district coast, right? …But is that even possible? Objects are monstrous weapons 50 meters across. How could one of those escape notice by radar, satellite, and the naked eye?”

“I don’t know.”

Froleytia shook her head.

At the same time, she spoke as if to herself.

“But that’s exactly why jack-in-the-boxes are so scary. You need to be careful too. If you take this lightly, you might not get by with a simple sprained ankle this time.”

Part 4

And so they headed out for the attack on Amazon City.

However, Froleytia was not commanding the operation from the front lines. She was in the maintenance base zone constructed in a location far from the battlefield. With the kiseru in her mouth, she checked on the progress of the unit on a monitor.

Froleytia liked things in the Japanese style, but the interior of her room was relatively lacking in such things. This was due to the

maintenance base having been almost completely destroyed by the Mass Driver conglomerate Object in the Iguazu district. She was having a new collection brought in with the additional supplies, so she must have had quite a bit stored away in the European home country.

(…The stage this time is a jungle ghost town filled with buildings. It's the perfect environment for hidden soldiers.)

That would not be an issue in a battle between Objects. After all, an Object was simply too large. With the exception of mountainous regions like in the Iguazu district, those giant machines could not be hidden by the terrain.

However, using one of those monstrous weapons to search for puny humans hidden in the jungle was a different story altogether.

Of course, Objects had various forms of sensors, so they could search for hidden people via body heat or magnetism. However, the jungle was filled with living things, so a massive number of objects would be found even when searching for human-sized living creatures.

(Now then. Can we solve that problem by having foot soldiers work with the Object? Or should we focus on trying to pick up on human noises such as voices and footsteps?)

With the sensors on full power, the presence of allied soldiers could actually get in the way. The specific method could be handled by the people on the scene, but Froleytia had to take care of any problems that might arise because of that.

To make sure that she did not overlook even the smallest sign, Froleytia stared intently at the monitor once more. However, she then received a transmission.

It was from the princess who was piloting the Baby Magnum.

"I have a question for you," said the princess.

"Has the situation changed since the strategy meeting?"

As far as Froleytia could tell, nothing had changed, but she asked to make sure. As expected, the princess denied that possibility.

"No, it is nothing like that. I suppose this is a more private sort of

question. Is that okay?”

“?”

(This is unusual for her.)

Before Froleytia could realize what was odd about the princess, the princess herself cut to the chase.

“…Is it true you were groped by Quenser?”

“Bfh!?”

It felt like the long, narrow kiseru almost shot from her mouth.

However the princess had interpreted that response, she fell silent.

“…”

“Wait, don’t just fall silent. Don’t tell me you feel like your mental condition has dropped because of that! You know just how much the mental state of the Elite can affect the outcome of a battle, right? If we lose the war here, it will end up in textbooks. If that happens due to whether someone was groped or not, the higher ups of the military will faint and the history buffs will laugh their asses off!”

“…Oh, dear. You aren’t even trying to deny that you were groped.”

Froleytia wiped an unpleasant sweat from her brow as she felt a dangerous tension in the princess’s oddly low tone of voice. Froleytia felt like something had been off about herself ever since that incident.

Part 5

The advance on the ruins of Amazon City began.

Quenser and Heivia joined a group of about 200 people and headed to the ruins on off road vehicles. They did not head directly into the city. Instead, they got off about 3 kilometers away, and split up further before heading to the city on foot.

From the point they stopped the vehicles on, they were heading through tropical jungle. Beyond the thick trees was a group of concrete buildings. That was the ruins of Amazon City. After it had been abandoned, it had become buried in green.

They had known the jungle was just south of the equator, but it was worse than they had been expecting. The heat and humidity was trapped there like inside a plastic greenhouse. When they breathed

in, a lukewarm feeling gradually spread through their bodies.

Heivia looked fed up with it almost instantly.

“…Dammit. So we’re acting as human antennae again.”

“The Baby Magnum isn’t at 100%, so they probably don’t want to send it straight in.” Quenser wiped sweat from his chin with the back of his hand. “This place is horrible. The ground seems so soft. Isn’t there a better way to this place?”

“We would be a lot more comfortable using the remains of the highway created for Amazon City, but that would put us in plain view of the enemy.”

“Hey, Heivia. What’s that on the front of your rifle?”

“You can’t tell? It’s insecticide.”

“…Heivia, is the type of person that can’t touch bugs? To be fair, I can’t stand roaches myself.”

“You idiot.” Heivia brought his hand to his forehead. “This is the Amazon. It’s the world’s biggest jungle. There are rare and dangerous bugs that’ll sting you and bite you here. The giant spiders jump at you, so it’s dangerous to try to stomp on them with your boot. But it would be a waste of ammo to shoot at all of them. Also, it would be stupid to let the enemy know your location because of a bug. That’s why we need insecticide to deal with any dangerous bugs. Since we’re going for a bold attack here, we don’t have to worry about leaving any traces of our presence with dead bugs.”

“Is that so? I just hope it doesn’t leave a strange smell that military dogs can follow.”

“I’d be pretty excited to run across a Hercules beetle.”

Quenser and Heivia continued through the jungle as some strange bird cried overhead.

As Heivia used the various sensors attached to his rifle to check for hidden soldiers or traps, he said, “And what is that you have in your pocket? Looks like a book. Is it a camping manual for if we get stranded out in the jungle?”

“It’s nothing like that. It’s just a wild west novel. I was thinking I could read it if we had to wait around for the enemy to appear.”

“Oh, c’mon, Quenser. We’re taking part in a war involving giant Objects. Why are you reading a story about people shooting at each other with tiny pistols?”

“Heivia, you mustn’t forget the danger a single bullet can present.”

“Heh, you’re one to talk. You don’t even carry a single handgun. With how much you love to study, I would have thought you would be staring at Object designs during your breaks.”

Heivia spoke in light tones, but Quenser fell silent.

He could not tell Heivia he had been reading a paper by Sladder Honeysuckle.

That man was not normal.

All Quenser had been able to get his hands on was what was released online to the Legitimacy Kingdom. The Capitalist Corporations and the Legitimacy Kingdom were at war, so the information was likely of little importance. However, Quenser could see a fragment of that man’s genius hidden within.

Even a child could give a twisted response to a predetermined theme.

But that was only by using nonsense arguments.

An idea forced out while knowing it would never be useful in reality was no more valuable than an idle chat.

However, the place Sladder started from and where he kept his focus was not normal. He mentioned things Quenser had never noticed until then. Despite starting from some twisted idea that was something like a trompe l'oeil, the argument he constructed was perfectly logical and well-reasoned. He went through the proper steps needed to efficiently implement the theoretical idea.

The finished paper left its readers with a deep impression of a certain type. It was similar to seeing someone fit every single piece of a veritable mountain of luggage into a small storage box. It was close to that feeling of “oh, so you could put it in at that angle”.

However, Sladder's text did not end there.

He also included a certain "possibility".

If what he imagined was ever completed, it would be something unthinkable. And yet the reader was left with the desire to see a world where the ideas written there were made a reality. Even if that would only help the enemy.

That was the type of text it was.

It opened up a brand new dimension that would be unachievable just by memorizing the information in some textbooks.

It was no ordinary task to fight and win against someone with a brain as twisted as his.

Quenser was trembling in fear at the prospect, but Heivia did not notice. Instead, he held up his insecticide-equipped rifle and glared hatefully up at the sky.

"God dammit. This formation is assuming a counterattack. We're scattered about to reduce the losses in a bombardment."

"If the princess's Object was at 100%, there might have been a smarter way of doing this." Quenser wiped sweat from his face. "But it's odd."

"What is?"

"If the Mass Driver conglomerate had that high power railgun, why didn't they just use it to target the moon base? They didn't have to go with that roundabout method of using the satellite via the probe robot in Antarctica."

"How am I supposed to know what they're thinking? Maybe they felt there was meaning in carrying out their terrorist attack with a laser," said Heivia offhand. "Also, their Object's main cannon kept breaking up in midair due to frictional heat. They might have not thought it would make it out of the atmosphere."

"…"

"Hey, don't think about this so much. The Object is gone. It doesn't matter to us how the Mass Driver conglomerate insists on using their Object."

“I hope we can be that optimistic.”

“Ahn? …Oh, are you talking about the possibility of the Mass Driver conglomerate having a second Object?” Heivia sounded annoyed. “Only an Object can defeat an Object. I guess that’s why they want to preserve the weakened Baby Magnum. But sending us forward to check for an Object is more dangerous than removing landmines.”

“It would be quite a tragedy if we carelessly sent the princess in and she was destroyed by a surprise attack. We would lose our piece for checkmate. Do you want to continue on with a war of attrition that will never end?” asked Froleytia over the radio. She continued as if to make doubly sure. “Listen. Whether there is a second Object or not is vitally important to know, but we also can’t let the enemy scatter. We need to keep as many from getting away as possible and kill them here. At the very least, we absolutely must kill their leader, Sladder Honeysuckle. If he gets away, we cannot end this war here.”

“Fine, fine. Is this Honeysuckle guy really that much of a problem?”

“He is the Mass Driver conglomerate’s prided Object designer. There is a risk of him even beginning construction on a new Object if he can make the proper preparations.”

“…You’re kidding, right? Doesn’t an Object cost at least 5 billion dollars?”

“He can raise that 5 billion on his own. He is a large shareholder and one of the most famous investors even in the Capitalist Corporations. I’m sure you know, but Object designer is a popular occupation because they receive massive rewards. He knows ways of taking that massive amount of money and making 10 or even 20 times the original amount. All transactions under the name Honeysuckle will have been frozen, but rumor has it that he has enough funds on hand for constructing an Object to be a real possibility.” Froleytia sounded annoyed. “That said, constructing an Object from scratch takes three full years. Unless he remains in hiding for a very long time, there may not be any real danger of this happening.”

“But if he joined forces with a third country that wants his skills, this could get bad,” said Quenser.

“Exactly,” replied Froleytia. “I have no intention of letting this war

grow any further. Let's exterminate these idiots as quickly as possible and stop the convoy near a hot spring. ...But to do that, we need to kill the Mass Driver conglomerate here. We cannot let Sladder Honeysuckle escape no matter what. We need to make sure to get a picture of him, as well as get his fingerprints and a blood sample. We can negotiate with the Capitalist Corporations afterwards and use that information to confirm we completed the mission."

"That's only if the Capitalist Corporations go along with that."

"We just need to create a situation where they have to."

A different signal came in over Quenser's radio.

He could hear a jet engine far, far above. The radio transmission was coming from there.

"This is Burning Alpha. We could scatter landmines around Amazon City to block their escape. We can drop them from the sky at any time."

"I appreciate the suggestion, but no. I don't want to contaminate our own land with mines. That would create a dangerous land that threatens to blow off someone's leg even 50 years from now," replied Froleytia.

"These are smart mines, so they can be detonated remotely."

"If you can guarantee that not even one of those safety devices will fail, I will give approval. However, if one of them does fail, your unit will be plowing those fields. Do you still recommend this, Burning Alpha?"

"Don't joke. Our job is to fly through the sky. We're not used to trudging through the mud."

Quenser looked up at the contrail overhead.

"Is the assault landing aircraft carrier helping out too?" he asked.

"Everyone is desperate to make sure the damaged Object can function. I thought Objects were synonymous with war. Did we find our way back to a war from a few decades ago?" complained Heivia.

Meanwhile, the texture of the ground changed. Instead of the soft, wet humus, they were now walking on a cracked asphalt road. They had made it to one of the countless roads that connected to the ruins of Amazon City that had been swallowed up by the jungle.

They were near the city that would be the battlefield.

Heivia frowned and looked up for no real reason.

“Wait, are we just going in? Isn’t the Object going to blow away the buildings in the way first? We have no idea how many enemies there are in these buildings.”

“They can’t hide an Object in them though. We can ignore anything that can’t,” replied Froleytia coolly. “The princess’s Object was damaged in the battle against the Break Carrier and her railgun and coilgun shells have not been replenished. We want to avoid any unnecessary firing. And only a high power attack from another Object can damage it. It won’t be destroyed from a portable missile fired from a window.”

“…We’re in trouble, Heivia. It doesn’t look like they’re thinking about any protection for soldiers like us,” said Quenser with a sigh.

At the same time, he heard a great roar as many trees were knocked over.

He turned around to see a giant mass of steel approaching from behind. It was the Baby Magnum.

“Seriously? Let’s just destroy the entire environment here, why don’t we?”

“This is a lot more ecological than when they practiced slash-and-burn farming.”

Their field of vision was opening up.

They had entered the ruins of Amazon City.

Quenser and Heivia were standing on a surface covered in gray asphalt and concrete. However, the artificial ground had giant cracks running through it and trees were growing through those gaps in the center of the road. Most of the windows on the buildings were gone and plenty of the buildings were leaning. The traffic lights and streetlights were of course not lit. The rusty street signs

were so worn down it was impossible to tell what had been written on them.

The one other noticeable characteristic was….

“This is a damn wide road. It has 3 lanes on each side, but it looks 80 meters across overall. I think the road takes up more area than the buildings,” muttered Quenser.

Heivia replied offhandedly, “The main street was probably designed to accommodate a parade featuring an Object.”

Looking up, Quenser could see power lines running high in the sky between building rooftops. The power network was likely constructed from a combination of underground cables and those high cables so as to not get in the way of an Object parade. The subway and water system may have been set up to not pass below the main street for that same reason.

Half in shock, Quenser said, “It is true that a lot of large cities in safe countries are designed for those ridiculous parades, but it isn’t normal to keep that width for the roads other than the main street.”

“This city was made for jungle mining. They needed the roads to be wide and durable enough to allow the large machinery to pass smoothly through.”

“Hmm. The dump trucks for that kind of thing are as tall as a school building, right?”

“Yeah, the driver needs to climb a staircase to get in.”

Suddenly, they heard distant gunshots ringing through the blue sky. As if lured out by those gunshots, more gunshots followed. If they focused, they could notice a vague difference in the pitch of the gunshots.

Two different forces were firing at each other.

Heivia reached for the switch for his rifle’s sensors and said, “So it’s begun.”

“The princess is nearby too, so I guess we don’t really need to try so hard to remain so covert.”

Quenser and Heivia were not in the middle of the road. They were

slowly moving along while keeping next to a pile of rubble a few meters tall that had likely once been a building wall. They were watching their surroundings closely as they advanced.

“What do you think?”

“We can probably ignore anything from above. As Froleytia said, I doubt there are any weapons that can critically damage an Object.”

“But those spare cannons that attacked us in Antarctica and on the Iguazu coast were railguns meant to be used on Objects. So…”

“Yeah, and they’re meant to be attached to a 200,000 ton Object when fired. When attached to the ground, you need to put an anchor over 10 meters deep into the ground to fix them in place. If you attached them to the floors of these rundown buildings, they’d knock the entire building over when fired.”

“Understood. So we just need to worry about snipers in a window while we search for any spare cannons on the ground.”

At that point, the princess contacted them over the radio.

“Quenser, Heivia, plug your ears.”

“?”

“I have received an order to assist with a bombardment. If you do not hurry up, your eardrums will be blown out.”

“God dammit!!” the two idiots shouted.

They did not only plug their ears, but also leaped down to the ground.

Immediately afterwards, a tremendous noise and shockwave rushed toward them.

A coilgun shell ripped through a few buildings ahead and flew off into the distance. It was one of the smaller cannons on the Object, but the word “small” only applied when talking on the scale of that monstrosity of a weapon.

Quenser got up within a cloud of dust and coughed.

“Cough, cough. Dammit, I think that kind of assistance is as dangerous as the enemy…”

“I-I’d certainly want to get 100 to 200 meters away from where it hits at the very, very least.”

That was the strength of a unit with an Object.

The strength of those foot soldiers was not just the assault rifles they held. As long as they could call in the coordinates, the Object could blow away the target with pinpoint accuracy. They were merely borrowing the power of the Object, but there was still nothing more frightening for their enemies.

Quenser looked around the area and said, “It’s possible there are hidden enemy soldiers or spare cannons around here. And now we have to be careful to make sure our own Object doesn’t blow us away with that shockwave. …Dammit. What ever happened to leaving war to the Objects?”

Froleytia’s voice then came from his radio.

“Those spare cannons are relatively small when it comes to Object armaments. They aren’t main cannon class, so I doubt they can shoot through an Object’s armor. You do not need to be on the lookout for them.”

“Then remind me why we’re out here again.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that the Baby Magnum is damaged? One of the damaged areas is the propulsion device. Right now, it is possible the Baby Magnum cannot move across excessively tall piles of rubble. If that happens, the combat engineers are needed. You need to use your explosives to blow away those shackles as quickly as possible.”

Meanwhile, the princess’s Object had entered the city. The main street had been constructed to accommodate an Object parade, but the street signs and traffic lights would likely have been removed beforehand. They did not have time for that at the moment. The Baby Magnum simply smashed those obstacles as it advanced.

Heivia had been speaking over his radio, but he now turned to Quenser.

“It seems the others have entered the city from different points. We’re going to head inwards, slowly tightening the circle, until we have searched our way to the center of the city. The frequency of gunshots will likely increase as times goes on.”

“What exactly are we going to do? Are we going to head into each and every building to search for enemies?”

“First, we’ll destroy their transportation.” Heivia shrugged. “With 500 people, the enemy is on the level of a company. It can’t be easy to transport all of them. They must have a large convoy somewhere, so we just have to blow that up. That way, they can’t escape these ruins. We can take our time searching them out then.”

Quenser looked up at the contrails overhead.

“Can’t they find that from the sky? Y’know, using satellites or fighters.”

Even then, the delta-winged fighters flying through the blue sky were dropping large bombs into the middle of the ruins. Low rumbles were passing below Quenser and Heivia’s feet.

“It isn’t that easy,” said Froleytia over the radio in an annoyed voice. “The satellite confirmed a large group of vehicles entered an underground parking garage in the middle of the city, but there is no guarantee there are no other vehicles. They might have additional transportation hidden ahead of time in a different underground parking garage.”

“So we need to start searching any underground areas?”

“You should also check any abandoned vehicles you come across. They might merely be disguised to look abandoned and Sladder Honeysuckle could escape using one.”

Multiple gunshots sounded in the distance.

There was no combat occurring near Quenser and Heivia, but that may have been because no enemy soldiers had been in the area by mere coincidence or because they had left formation to distance themselves from Baby Magnum.

“If Honeysuckle suggested that plan when they’re cornered, wouldn’t he just end up being ganged up on by the others? We see Honeysuckle as an important figure we must not let escape, but would they really see that as a means of victory? What the Mass Driver conglomerate wants is a safe place to head to. If they were putting their lives on the line and then their commander headed for the goal on his own, I doubt the others would accept just being cast aside.”

“Quenser, let me tell you something. It does not matter what they think,” replied Froleytia with a short sigh. “We just need to achieve our own objective. Even if Honeysuckle was truly thinking of a means for world peace, we would shoot him and call it a day. All of this has surely led them to resent us. If they gain power once more, the odds are good they will turn their sights on the Legitimacy Kingdom.”

“Yes, yes. Our cool, beautiful commander is frightening,” said Heivia casually with a twisted smile on his face as gunshots and explosions sounded in the distance.

But then…

“…”

“?”

The two of them came to a stop.

The path before them had turned black. It began about 20 meters ahead. At first they thought some past earthquake had ripped up the asphalt and exposed the black soil beneath. However, they realized they were wrong as they approached.

Something like black tar was flowing from the entrance to a building on the side of the road…or so it looked. The black stain was flowing thin and wide so that it covered the entire width of that large runway-like road.

Yes.

That was what it looked like, but…

“Are you kidding me…?” groaned Heivia.

When they looked closely, it became clear it was not a black liquid that was spreading out. Many, many small objects were crawling up and down. Someone who watched some of the more unusual documentaries might recognize what the collection of tens if not hundreds of thousands of small black objects was.

It was a swarm of army ants.

Quenser and Heivia both quickly moved instinctually back away from it. The great number of small bugs caused a physiological

revulsion inside them and the smattering of knowledge they had caused fear to well up within them.

“Wait just a second! Aren’t these those things that move in groups of tens of thousands and will swarm over any cows or pigs nearby and eat them!?”

“That’s the Amazon for you. Nature is on an entirely different level here!!” shouted back Heivia as his eyes raced about the area.

He had no intention of charging into an area that had been taken over by the army ants. He was hoping to find a side road to head down, but…

He heard a rustling sound like a plastic bag being balled up.

It was the sound of a large tree growing near the two boys falling over so as to block the path back. The inside of the tree had been entirely rotten, but the confusion of branches growing out from it created natural intercrossing bars to block their escape. It was too thick for them to climb over or crawl through.

Heivia’s eyes opened wide.

“Shit!! What the hell is going on!? That thing was sticking up through the asphalt just a second ago!!”

“It might have just been barely standing and the shockwave of the princess’s bombardment shook it a little too much…”

At any rate, they could not fall back any further than 30 meters.

The roads in the ruins of Amazon City were quite wide, but the giant tree was half broken so that it formed a V-shape on the asphalt. Between the building walls and the remains of the giant tree, Quenser and Heivia were completely trapped. Their one escape was through the area controlled by the army ants.

Quenser tapped Heivia on the shoulder as he stared at the swarm of insects.

“This is bad! If we don’t do something soon, we’ll be part of the ant and the grasshopper’s winter reserves!!”

“What exactly do you suggest we do!? If I tried shooting that group of tens of thousands, I’d run out of ammo in no time at all. And if

we tried stomping on them with our boots, they'd probably just climb up our legs and counterattack!!"

Quenser pointed at the object attached to the end of Heivia's rifle.

"How about you use that insecticide you have there?"

"Oh!! I did supply myself with this special item, didn't I!?"

Heivia must have completely forgotten he had it, but now he finally held up his rifle. He pulled the trigger of the insecticide attached like a bayonet.

The swarm of army ants had already approached about 10 meters.

The cloud of insecticide forcefully struck them. Instead of spreading out like a spray, the insecticide flew in a direct trajectory like a powerful water gun. Quenser optimistically thought about how it could be used to blind an enemy temporarily.

But then…

"Gyahh!? The insecticide just sent the army ants on a desperate rampage our way!"

"Get back, you idiot! We need to get some distance!! If they catch up to us, we'll be bitten all over!!"

While fleeing with Heivia, Quenser frantically shouted into his radio.

"Baby Magnum! Can you fry these ants with a small laser beam or something!?"

"I can, but…"

"Then hurry! Do it now!!"

"If I fire it at the ground that near you, the light will make the light from welding look like nothing. Most likely, the two of you will be permanently blinded."

"Agh, dammit!! So we're blocked at every turn!!"

"Y'know, this is a pretty lame war we're fighting if we're about to be killed by ants!!" shouted Heivia as he sprayed about the water gun-like insecticide.

Quenser looked at a nearby building and said, “What do we do!? Should we head upstairs in a building and wait for them to pass!?”

“Didn’t the ant colony come from within one of those buildings!? And if the ants happen to head inside the building we flee into, we’ll be cornered eventually!!”

Quenser recalled the feeling of the bag he wore on his back. It was possible he could throw a plastic explosive and blow them away.

(But could I really take out all of those tens of thousands of ants? I could probably blow away a portion of them, but…)

At that point, Quenser reached for the smoke bombs inside Heivia’s uniform. The sudden action surprised Heivia.

“Kyahh, pervert! What are you doing, you molester!!”

“You still have the mental leeway to joke, Heivia? ...Anyway!! Hand over smoke grenades and smoke bombs for contacting helicopters!! Just hand over everything that emits smoke!!”

“What, why? How are you going to target the smoke toward them?”

Without responding, Quenser pulled the pins out of the drink can-sized objects and threw them one after another.

In shock, Heivia shouted, “You really suck, you know that!? Half of those didn’t even land in the ant colony! And the smoke’ll head up, so it’ll barely affect the ants crawling on the ground!!”

“This is fine.”

Quenser hurriedly reached for the Hand Axe plastic explosives in his bag, carefully adjusted the amount, and stabbed an electric fuse into it. This time he threw the mass straight up. It flew up a few dozen meters.

“And now a bomb?”

“This is to make sure that smoke doesn’t go to waste.”

Heivia frowned in confusion and Quenser hit the switch on his radio.

The Hand Axe detonated in midair.

The smoke that had flown high into the sky was slammed back to the ground.

It was like a giant fist had dropped down on top of it.

Depending on the model, the smoke grenades and smoke bombs let out white, red, yellow, and other colors of smoke. All those colors dropped back to the ground at once as if struck by that giant hand. When they struck the ground, they spread out in every direction.

The many ants panicked and tried to scatter in every direction, but they did not have enough time. After about 180 seconds in the smoke, they lost their momentum, started only twitching, and finally stopped moving altogether.

"…Ow… If that had just been a normal blast, you wouldn't have been able to tell how much explosive was used."

"Hey, Quenser. Are those things really dead? They're not just playing dead, right?"

"How about you use that insecticide to check?"

Heivia cautiously sprayed the insecticide from a distance, but he got no response. The two boys finally breathed a sigh of relief, but they still didn't enjoy the prospect of walking through that swarm of ants. They kept as far away from the middle as they could. In other words, they timidly headed across the carpet of dead ants while pressed up against the side of a building.

After crossing that carpet of ant corpses, Heivia looked around.

"We need to hurry. The Mass Driver conglomerate will head here to check on that explosion and the smoke. Even if a firefight is inevitable, I'd rather not be surrounded. We can at least leave a bomb or some kind of trap, though."

"…No, look at that."

"What is it?"

Heivia looked puzzled, but Quenser pointed inside a window of one of the buildings.

"Aren't those Mass Driver conglomerate soldiers that are collapsed there? See, they've been bitten all over and have swollen up."

“Seriously? …I guess that explains why we were the only ones to avoid a firefight.”

“War really can be pretty lame sometimes.”

Part 6

Froleytia was on standby in the maintenance base zone that had been set up well back of the battlefield. The commander’s office prepared for her was properly covered in tatami mats ordered from the Japanese islands and a short table had her laptop sitting on it.

Froleytia was using that laptop to monitor the progress of the battle, but then she received a video chat. She placed her long, narrow Japanese kiseru in a Japanese tobacco tray and then opened a new window.

A solidly built middle aged man was displayed in the window.

It took some effort on Froleytia’s part to keep her expression passive upon seeing the rank insignia on the shoulders of his military uniform.

(A Capitalist Corporations major general!! I had a feeling they would be calling before long, but…)

“I am Major General Buffer Planters calling on behalf of the Capitalist Corporations military. It has come to our attention that you are pursuing our Mass Driver conglomerate.”

(Buffer Planters…)

Froleytia recognized the name.

(Dammit. That’s the VIP that Quenser and Heivia carelessly saved from that moon villa attack.)

“I am Major Froleytia Capistrano, the commanding officer here. So you will not waste your time, let me inform you ahead of time that we will not discuss the means by which we will end this.”

As ranks went, there was a huge difference between major and

major general, but Froleytia did not particularly care. What mattered more was that they were soldiers of enemy nations.

It seemed the man felt the same.

“Girl, we are not talking about ridiculous honor here. We would like to talk about profit.”

“Are you afraid we will gain information on Mass Driver conglomerate technology after we crush them?”

If the Capitalist Corporations was worried about something, it would be that.

It was also possible they wanted to make sure Sladder Honeysuckle, the Object designer involved in the construction of the Break Carrier, did not defect to the Legitimacy Kingdom.

“Even if Honeysuckle surrenders to us, we will shoot him, so do not worry. In the Legitimacy Kingdom, we value honor and law above all. After someone has opposed us as he has, we have no system by which to receive them with open arms.”

“No, that is not what we are worried about.” Buffer shook his head slowly. “For one, if the Mass Driver conglomerate truly intended to defect to the Legitimacy Kingdom, they would not have fought with your unit like that.”

“True enough, but…”

Froleytia finally began to frown.

In that case, why had that Capitalist Corporations military leader contacted her?

Not caring about the technological information Sladder Honeysuckle had was not like a modern soldier who sent Objects to the battlefield. If there was anything else he was thinking about, it had to be…

(Money…?)

Sladder had received massive compensation for his Object designs and he supposedly carried out massive stock trades using that money. He was such a massive investor, it was said he could prepare an Object and start a war all on his own. It was possible the

Capitalist Corporations would insist that money belonged to them. But…

(Is that really more important than the Object development race? It is true the Capitalist Corporations supposedly prioritize human rights by the amount of money people have saved, but does that thought process go so far as to…?)

“Oh, how rude of me. Did I confuse you by any chance?” Buffer Planters shook his head once more and then gave a bitter smile. “I merely said we are not worried about Honeysuckle defecting ‘to the Legitimacy Kingdom’.”

“You don’t mean…”

“This is no longer an issue of only two forces,” continued Buffer as if to reinforce Froleytia’s fear. “The Mass Driver conglomerate has requested assistance from the Information Alliance.”

Her face grew pale.

The Information Alliance was one of the world powers on par with the Legitimacy Kingdom that Froleytia belonged to. Naturally, many nations and Objects belonged to that force. And these Objects would not be like the princess’s. Those monstrous weapons would be in perfect condition and polished to look as good as new. Not only did the Information Alliance have plenty of Generation 1 Objects, but they also had plenty of Generation 2 Objects.

They were quite skilled on the technology front and it was said their military software surpassed even that of the Legitimacy Kingdom military. They were the ones putting the most research into projects to create unmanned Objects using AI.

(…Not good. If that’s true, we can’t have them interfering given our current exhausted state!!)

Froleytia clenched her teeth and pictured an image of the layout of power in South America. Currently, the Baby Magnum, Quenser, and the others were deployed in the Amazon district. The Parima district that was ruled by the Information Alliance lay right next to it.

Buffer Planters continued, “At this rate, the Information Alliance military is sure to send aid to the ruins of Amazon City. The one question is whether that aid will be nothing more than supplying

firearms and additional supplies or if it will include a large scale movement of personnel, weapons, and at least one Object."

Part 7

Soldiers who had been taken out by the army ants were collapsed here and there.

It seemed they had been in the middle of setting up a gun platform hidden behind a building. One of the spare Object railguns and a crane equipped with a boring device for driving the 10 meter+ anchor into the ground were left with the work half complete.

In shock, Heivia muttered, "Were they so focused on their work that they didn't notice the ants drawing near?"

Even on a battlefield ruled by Objects, soldiers would check their surroundings. However, they would focus on the routes by which people could approach. If a swarm of army ants suddenly came pouring out of a manhole directly below the equipment, that would easily slip through a gap in their guard.

Heivia crouched down and peered at one of the convulsing soldiers.

A bite from a mosquito would cause a slight swelling. The soldiers had similar marks covering their entire bodies two or three times over. The small ants had bitten them again and again. Even so, they had been fortunate enough to not have run across the types of army ants that would eat them down to the bone.

Quenser counted the soldiers.

"…It looks like they're still alive. What should we do?"

"Tie them up and abandon them." Heivia replied offhand. "If they don't intend to fight, we can just leave them alone. I'd rather not go through and shoot mostly incapacitated people one by one."

"Well, I doubt they would be able to fight even if fellow Mass Driver conglomerate soldiers found them, cut their ropes, and give them guns."

“But I see no reason to worry too much about the possibility of some other animal or insect coming by and biting them while they’re tied up.”

“…Can’t we treat them or rescue them?”

“After it’s all over, we can come back to pick them up if we remember,” said Heivia as he looked around. “But this is strange.”

“What is?”

“Hasn’t the Mass Driver conglomerate backed themselves into a corner?” Heivia pointed at the partially set up spare railgun. “There’s no advantage for them in setting up something like this and trying to hold out here. The longer they spend here, the more time the Legitimacy Kingdom has to send in more Objects. Even if they have a second Object, this strategy will only shorten their lives.”

“Come to think of it…they are doing this backwards. What they want is a way of escaping, not a way of putting up a fight in a single spot. In fact, what did they come to the ruins of Amazon City for in the first place?” Quenser thought for a second. “What if we assume they are sticking with the original plan of escaping?”

“But they’re setting up these spare cannons to put up a final fight to the end. And even if they try to sneak away, the military satellites will see them. Then we just have to send an Object after them. … What are we doing running around on our own two legs?”

“Maybe there is some route the satellites can’t see. That would be a problem.”

“Ahn?” Heivia looked puzzled, but Quenser pointed down at the ground.

“The subway.”

“…You’re kidding…”

“Amazon City was originally created to be a large city. They must have put some effort into the transportation network. It wouldn’t be surprising if there was a direct subway connection to some other city.”

“Wait, wait, wait! So they’re setting up these spare cannons to….!?”

“To buy time! While we’re panicking up here, the Mass Driver conglomerate is going to try to flee through some long tunnel!!”

Quenser pulled out some of the Hand Axe plastic explosive and looked around the area. He quickly found a stairway leading down to the subway. He had no idea if he could make it in time, but he had to destroy that subway line.

“Hey, Amazon City was a large city meant for a million people. The subway has to run all over the place like a spider web, right!?”

“In the city, yes. But there will only be so many lines connecting to other cities. Most likely, there are only 2 or 3 ! Heivia, you get on the network and find a subway map from when the city was occupied!!”

“Dammit, this has gotten to be a real pain in the ass!!”

Heivia frantically tried to contact Froleytia, but he also kicked an assault rifle lying on the ground at the same time. It had belonged to one of the Mass Driver conglomerate soldiers who had been taken out by the army ants.

Heivia froze in place when he saw the magazine come out from the impact.

“What is it, Heivia?”

“Um…The Mass Driver conglomerate is a Capitalist Corporations organization, right? They should be getting their weapons from there, right?” As he spoke, Heivia poked at the magazine with his foot. “But these are 7.62mm bullets from the Spear Rifle Company. Isn’t that Information Alliance ammo?”

As Heivia was muttering that, a transmission came in from Froleytia.

“All units, hurry up in this pursuit!! The situation has begun to change. If we do not take out Sladder Honeysuckle right away, the flames of war could spread!!”

“Froleytia?” Quenser looked confused, but then he recalled what he had to do. “I know how Honeysuckle and the others are going to escape. Most likely, they’re using the subway tunnels! They’re setting up spare cannons around the city to buy time while they use the subway to escape while hidden from the satellites!!”

“Sorry, but that’s wrong, Quenser. This isn’t going to be so easy,” replied Froleytia without a second’s delay. “The Mass Driver conglomerate hopes to defect to the Information Alliance. If we do nothing, the Information Alliance will advance into the Amazon district in order to ‘rescue those who wish to seek refuge’. Apparently, the defection has already been officially recognized. In their opinion, it is wrong for Honeysuckle to not be with the Information Alliance.”

“You mean…”

“They really do intend to put up their final fight here!! If we do nothing, the Information Alliance will be here with an Object and all its strength as a world power, so they just have to hold out until then!! Dammit! It really is a simple plan on their part!!”

“That’s crazy…” groaned Heivia.

Protecting refugees who had already safely crossed the national border was one thing, but Quenser had never heard of a country crossing national borders like this to rescue someone who technically belonged to an enemy nation. If this kind of thing was permissible, national boundaries would lose all meaning.

But…

“Heivia, you saw how they used their Object, right? They must really want that technology. And the Legitimacy Kingdom and Information Alliance are already in conflict. If things between us are so bad they can hardly get worse, advancing into one of our countries isn’t completely out of the question for them.”

“That’s right, Quenser,” said Froleytia. “Also, the Capitalist Corporations fear their Object technology will be leaked to the Information Alliance if Honeysuckle defects. If the Information Alliance military does advance into the Amazon district, the Capitalist Corporations military is prepared to send an Object of their own into the Amazon district to stop this defection at all costs.”

“Seriously? This was bad enough with just two sides!” Heivia shouted.

If what Froleytia said was true, the Amazon district could turn into a hell in which Objects from four different forces clashed: The Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist

Corporations, and the Mass Driver conglomerate. Only ruins were left of Amazon City, but it was possible everything within those national boundaries could be swallowed up by a storm of destruction if the flames of war spread. This would of course affect the civilians as well as the soldiers.

Quenser frantically opened his mouth. “I-if that happens, how many Objects will there be here!? Will we get reinforcements!? Will we gather all our Objects in the Amazon district!?”

“They’re all either tied up in other operations or undergoing maintenance. Either way, this is not a situation where we can count on reinforcements. If we had Objects to spare, we would not have used the princess’s Object in its damaged state.”

“Could this be any worse…?” muttered Heivia.

Froleytia must have agreed because her tone was one of annoyance.

“That’s why we need to crush Honeysuckle as quickly as possible so we can end this on our own. If the Mass Driver conglomerate is completely destroyed, the Information Alliance will lose its reason to interfere. That will in turn take away the Capitalist Corporations’ reason. If we can’t do that, we will be the ones cornered. You know what condition the Baby Magnum is in, right?”

“Dammit. This is bad, Quenser,” groaned Heivia.

The princess’s Object had been heavily damaged in the battle with the Break Carrier. And it had been sent here before receiving proper repairs. It was more than enough firepower to take care of the remnants of the conglomerate, but not so much when it came to a clash against cutting edge Objects sent in by other world powers. If her Object was at 100%, the outcome would have been unknown, but it was obvious what would happen in this damaged state.

Quenser felt like his vision was going dark, but he forced his dizzy head to start working again.

“Froleytia, what’s the time limit? Do we know how long we have until the Information Alliance military is coming?”

“We don’t have any real information on their timetable. However, they have no reason to wait around. If it was me, I would head out as soon as possible. The satellites have confirmed the Information Alliance is constructing temporary prefab buildings on the border of

our Amazon district and their Parima district. That is likely their Object's maintenance base zone. Once that is complete, they will likely send their cutting edge Object across the border." Froleytia must have been tapping her fingers on her desk because a slight tapping noise could be heard as she carefully chose her words. "The base zone will likely be complete in 2 hours. If we do not crush the Mass Driver conglomerate and kill Sladder Honeysuckle in that time, both the Information Alliance and the Capitalist Corporations will invade."

"Shit!!" swore Heivia. "If the Mass Driver conglomerate has a second Object hidden somewhere, our odds would normally be 50/50 at best! But now that we have to rush this, we could make a fatal mistake!!"

"Hey, Heivia. Since they were going to use a spare railgun here, that means they have an Object to power it, right?" Quenser checked around the partially set up railgun. "If we follow the power cable, we might find the Object."

"Well, we need to hurry it up. Even if we find their Object, who knows if we can deal with it in such a short time!!"

However, that work was rendered needless.

They heard a heavy explosion in the distance. The low rumbling resounded deep in their guts as, a few kilometers away, gray dust shot up behind the intervening buildings.

"Wh-what!?"

"Quenser, Heivia!" shouted Froleytia. "Get away from there!! The Mass Driver conglomerate has made its move! They've used explosives to blow a huge hole in the roof of the underground mall!!"

"What…?"

Heivia was confused, but Quenser pulled out his handheld device and called up the satellite map. Quenser was left speechless, so he could not explain what he was seeing, but Froleytia's pressured voice continued from the radio.

"They're doing the same thing as in Antarctica or on the Iguazu district coast. It's a spare Object cannon. But this one is different! They're using a spare of the high power railgun used as the Break

Carrier's main cannon!!"

"…!!"

The two boys were frozen in shock.

That demonic cannon had pierced straight through an Object in a single shot from 500 kilometers away. If that was fired, the princess's Object could be taken out instantly, not to mention the soldiers like Quenser and Heivia.

"What do we do, Quenser!?"

"We can still make it in time…" Quenser grabbed his radio while frantically keeping in mind the map that was about to disappear. "Baby Magnum!! The cannon is just over 3000 meters away! That's well within range of your main cannons! Take it out before it takes you out!!"

She must have been thinking the same thing because the princess immediately took action.

Several buildings stood between the Baby Magnum and the high power railgun. Even if the princess fired a main cannon there, the obstacles would very likely alter the trajectory of her shots. However, the Break Carrier's main cannon held enough destructive force to fly in a straight line while ignoring the obstacles.

She could not do it there.

The princess came to that conclusion and then began moving her Object in a sideward slide. She was moving in a large circle with her target in the center. Once she reached the straight highway, there would be no obstacles. If she fired her low-stability plasma cannons or something then, she could finish it off.

But…

"…!?"

A gasp came from the princess over the radio.

Either due to the Object's sudden movement or due to natural deterioration, one of the nearby buildings had suddenly fallen over. Quenser and Heivia frantically fled into a back alley to avoid getting hit by the debris. The 10 story building had broken in half

at the center and fallen into the road. The mountain of concrete acted as a giant barricade.

A tsunami of dust swallowed up Quenser and Heivia a few seconds later.

“Ugh…cough!? Heivia, Heivia!?”

“Quenser, don’t move!!”

Quenser could not see, but he could tell Heivia’s voice was coming from an unnatural direction.

It was coming from directly below.

“The shock of the building collapsing caused the back alley to collapse. If you aren’t careful, you’ll be headed straight to the underground mall!!” From the sound of Heivia’s voice, he likely had not received any serious injuries in the fall. “I can’t climb back up from here. I’ll search for a different exit, so don’t you die before we can meet up again!!”

He said nothing more.

Most likely, he had left just as he had said he would.

Quenser was worried about Heivia, but he had other concerns. He altered his focus and spoke into his radio.

“Cough, cough. Baby Magnum! How are things on your end!?”

“I cannot get over the rubble!! At this rate…!!”

As he listened to the princess’s bitter voice, the dust finally cleared up. While paying careful attention to his footing, Quenser ran out. As he headed for the Baby Magnum, he pulled out some Hand Axe plastic explosive, but he stopped moving before he could stab the electric fuse in.

It was too much.

The mountain of concrete blocking the road was nearly 10 meters tall. With that much, a single combat engineer did not have enough explosives to blow it all up.

“Baby Magnum! Can you blow away the wreckage with your main cannons!?”

“Not from here…!”

“Then try moving back a bit and-…!!”

Having realized something, Quenser trailed off.

The Baby Magnum’s propulsion device was primarily located on a reverse Y-shaped part extending below the spherical main body. The bottom of that part produced massive amounts of static electricity to make the giant Object hover. Then laser reflection was used to rapidly expand the air and move it forward. However…

“Shit. Are the ‘legs’ trapped in the rubble!?”

“Quenser, you don’t have to blow it all up. Could you just take care of the rubble that is keeping me from moving?”

“I’ll try!!”

Quenser looked up at the rubble that had piled up like a mountain. It did indeed seem simpler to use the explosives rather than trying to move the rubble. However, there was no guarantee that it would free the Baby Magnum. It was possible that removing that portion of the rubble would only cause more to slide down and trap it once more.

All the while, the Mass Driver conglomerate high power railgun would be rotating its barrel their way.

Quenser grabbed at the rubble that looked like a stone wall destroyed in an earthquake.

“What will you do once you get your ‘legs’ out of this rubble!? Can you go around another way!?”

“There are not many paths large enough for an Object, so I would have to go well out of my way…!!”

“Shit,” swore Quenser as he tried to climb up to a spot where he could set up a bomb. To blow away the rubble holding down the reverse Y-shaped propulsion device, he had to climb up over 7 meters.

However, he could not do it.

The mountain of rubble was not a single piece of rock like the cliffs rock climbers loved. The concrete he grabbed as a handhold

crumbled and Quenser fell back down to the road.

“Quenser!!”

“Dammit. Would it be faster to just throw the bomb up there!?”

The destructive power of a bomb changed depending on how it was set up. To destroy such a large amount of rubble, it would be more effective to bury the bomb in the rubble than to just place the bomb on top. He was unsure if he even had enough to blow it all away under the best conditions, so he could not be negligent in how he used the explosives.

“Quenser go into the building to your left. It would be quickest if you climbed onto a protrusion of the rubble from a 3rd story window and then climbed down!”

“Shit. Do I have time to do that!?”

Quenser got up and ran into the building as he gritted his teeth. There was a large area inside. The first few floors created an atrium.

And then he was left speechless once more.

He could of course not use the elevator, but the escalator used in place of stairs had crumbled partway up. He could not reach the third floor.

(Is there…Is there an emergency staircase somewhere!?)

Quenser looked around, but he was in such a rush that he found nothing.

Three thousand meters away, the Mass Driver conglomerate Object might have been beginning to send out its targeting signal.

But then…

“This is Burning Alpha calling Baby Magnum. From what I can hear, you seem to be in trouble. I have a 500 kilo bomb here, so do you need me to drop it on top of that rubble?”

Quenser was left in shock at that transmission from the fighter flying through the sky.

It would be great if he could use that huge bomb, but in all

likelihood he could not. The odds were good he would be shot down by the Mass Driver conglomerate's anti-aircraft fire before he was able to drop the bomb.

Quenser frantically grabbed his radio and said, "Burning Alpha! A spare Object cannon has been confirmed to be operational in the ruins of Amazon City!! They likely have anti-air lasers, too! Get out of here! If you fly in here, you'll be shot down in no time at all!!"

"I know that, baby!" The fighter pilot smiled as he replied to Quenser. "That just means I have to choose a course that won't let it get a lock."

Part 8

With the partially set up railgun and the spare Break Carrier main cannon hidden in the underground area prepared, it was highly likely that the anti-air laser beam cannons equipped on Objects were set up in the ruins of Amazon City as well.

Normally, a fighter had no way of resisting anti-air lasers that flew at the speed of light.

The instant after a lock was made with electromagnetic or infrared targeting, the aircraft made of composite materials would explode. The pilot would not even have time to pull the ejection lever.

However, there were a few exceptions to this.

The first was to use jamming devices, chaff, or flares to prevent the Object from getting a lock. Since Objects used multiple methods of gaining a lock, this was not always successful. But with some luck, the fighter could escape for a few seconds or even a few dozen seconds.

The second was to fly at an exceedingly low altitude.

Lasers were made of light. At low altitudes, there was a lot of dust in the air, so the power would often decay and the trajectory would often be thrown slightly off. Above asphalt, the urban heat island phenomenon could even cause mirages, so the odds shot up that the laser would miss its target. However, flying at low altitude was no

guarantee of safety, so the fighter usually flew at full speed.

However…

That meant it would be flying at over 1200 kph through a city riddled with countless buildings and complexly crisscrossing power lines.

Staccato Raylong, the Legitimacy Kingdom pilot codenamed Burning Alpha, poured all his concentration into his right hand gripping the control column.

He was only 5 meters off the ground. The shockwave created by flying at supersonic speeds blew away trees growing from the cracks in the city, but Staccato did not have time to notice.

Mach 1 or 1200 kph meant he travelled more than 300 meters every second. As he travelled down the center of the straight highway, he occasionally turned his fighter so that the main wings created a vertical line in order to cut between buildings and occasionally flew beneath rusted pedestrian bridges. All the while, he flew through the ruined city at tremendous speed.

(This is practically suicide.)

A large building drew closer and closer.

The building grew to fill his vision like a giant monster opening its maw to devour him. This time, he could not avoid it.

(Unfortunately, it's my love for this kind of thing that led me to becoming a pilot!!)

The small delta wing fighter flew straight on.

However, it did not crash.

The building had lost all of its windows, and the fighter flew in at the 4th floor. It flew across that entire floor and back out through a window on the other side.

The small fighter Staccato was piloting was used on assault landing aircraft carriers. The runway it had to land on was 150 meters long. That was about half the length of the runway on old style aircraft carriers. For that reason, the small delta wing fighters Staccato and the other pilots used had several sensors on the bottom to

accurately measure the distance to the ground or the runway.

Staccato was using those sensors.

Before flying into the city, he had fired a laser in a completely straight line to confirm he had a straight shot through. That included the path through the building.

However, flying through the building was close to acrobatics because the floor and ceiling drew as close as 50 cm away at the tightest point. He placed his faith in the sensors that drew accurate information on his location from the surroundings shooting by at high speed and boldly charged straight through the empty building without hesitation. If he had not had the piloting skill to control his position down to the millimeter, he would have immediately slammed into the side of the building.

No sane person would have attempted it.

However, Staccato opened the throttle up even more with a savage smile on his lips. He lit the afterburners to truly bring out the fighter's full speed.

His reason was simple.

(Objects rule the battlefield. There aren't many places left for fighters to shine.)

As Staccato gathered information from both his vision and from the sensors, he piloted the fighter with frightening accuracy.

(Sometimes, I want to play the lead role!!)

Staccato flew through several empty buildings at supersonic speed and then felt as if his vision had suddenly expanded.

Before him was one of the giant Objects that symbolized war. Below the Object was a veritable mountain of rubble.

Staccato used a fingertip to release the safety on the 500 kilogram bomb.

They would only cross paths for an instant.

Staccato dropped the bomb directly above the rubble, but it felt more like he was placing it in the air than dropping it.

Part 9

While Quenser was looking around the abandoned building for a usable emergency staircase, the small delta-winged fighter passed by above him in an instant.

The fighter flew in through a window that was missing its glass, through the fourth floor portion of the atrium, and out the other side.

Immediately afterwards, the shockwave of supersonic speeds knocked Quenser over three meters through the air. The pain shooting from his ears and deep into his head was worse than the pain of landing back on the ground. Quenser almost cried out in pain, but he did not have time.

Outside.

At the very top of the mountain of rubble blocking the Baby Magnum's path.

Something was floating a mere 2 meters above it. No, it was falling. The object was a giant capsule about 3 meters long and made of black, shining steel. If what Burning Alpha had said was true…

(That's a 500 kilo bomb!?)

With that realization, Quenser forced his body up even as it rolled across the floor and then leaped into the staircase leading to the abandoned building's basement.

Immediately afterwards, there was a brilliant flash of light and all noise disappeared.

A tremendous blast of wind rushed through aboveground. Even after fleeing to the basement, Quenser's body was knocked a few meters by the shockwave. However, that was better than the alternative. A great amount of rubble poured down from the floor above and landed in the spot he had been in a split second before.

He could not even hear a ringing in his ears.

Quenser placed a hand against the wall, walked along the rubble, and climbed up to the surface through a hole in the ceiling that had

already been there due to deterioration. He left the building through a nearby back entrance.

“Dammit. Was that pilot trying to kill me!?”

The mountain of rubble had been piled up almost 10 meters high, but it had been blown away without a trace. Baby Magnum could freely move once more. However, the surrounding buildings had begun to collapse due to the blast. The princess’s Object moved before the rubble could block her path once more.

“I am going to fire a low-stability plasma cannon, so get down, Quenser!!” said the Princess over the radio.

In order to avoid putting herself in the sights of the enemy and to gain a straight line-of-sight path to the enemy, she moved the Baby Magnum in a giant circle with the high power railgun 3000 meters away at the center.

It took about 5 seconds to reach the giant bypass.

Three of the princess’s 7 main cannons had been destroyed in the battle with the Break Carrier. She moved the remaining 4 main cannon arms to accurately aim.

At that moment, a chill ran down Quenser’s back.

Something wasn’t adding up.

The Break Carrier’s main cannon was indeed powerful. That had been proven when it had destroyed a cutting edge Object in one shot at a distance of 500 kilometers when the target had been moving at high speed. It was quite a threat even while not installed on an Object.

However…

(Can a cannon with that much power really be fixed to the ground?)

Objects were equipped with over 100 weapons both large and small. The ones used in Antarctica or on the Iguazu district coast had been the smaller models of railguns. And yet they were still large enough to require anchors over 10 meters long to be stabbed into the ground.

So how long an anchor would be required for a main cannon of monstrous size that fired at Mach 25 and could destroy an Object in a single shot? And could they even get something like that?

(Don't tell me…)

Quenser's head was still swimming a bit thanks to the shockwave of that 500 kilo bomb, but the fear welling up within him forced in some clarity.

(Don't tell me…this is a trap!)

Quenser moved his aching body and looked in the direction of the princess's Object.

At that point, Quenser had already abandoned the possibility that the Mass Driver conglomerate had a mysterious second Object. If they did, they would not use the Break Carrier's high power railgun like that. It would be more effective to install it on the other Object.

That meant the Mass Driver conglomerate did not have an Object.

But something had supplied that massive power in Antarctica and the Iguazu district coast.

When it came down to it, the source of that power was quite simple.

(A prototype reactor!!)

Quenser gritted his teeth and grabbed his radio.

A prototype reactor was created to ensure the JPlevelMHD reactor that was the heart of an Object was constructed properly. Most likely, the dozen or so meter prototype reactor had been placed aboard a submarine or something and had been supplying power to the railguns with power cables stretching up from the sea.

"Baby Magnum…"

And…

The enemy's intention here…

Was to force the high power railgun to move despite the fact that they could not fire it…

To draw the princess out to the easiest point to destroy the high power railgun from.

And the most efficient way to use that treasured prototype reactor of theirs was…

“The enemy railgun is a trap!! A prototype reactor is likely hidden underground!! They’re going to intentionally make it go critical to

blow away the Object!!”

On the other end of the transmission, the princess froze up as she operated the Baby Magnum.

However, she had no time.

If the reverse Y-shaped propulsion device had been at 100% and she could use the static electricity and lasers to their fullest, she might have been able to avoid it.

However, that was not the case.

A giant explosion erupted below the princess’s Object.

Part 10

A bit before the prototype reactor explosion, Froleytia was sitting in her commander’s office with a bitter expression.

The expression was caused by the laptop sitting atop a short table. A video chat window was open, but she was no longer speaking with Major General Buffer Planters of the Capitalist Corporations. She was speaking with someone who was even more of a pain to deal with.

Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito of the Information Alliance military.

She was a brown skinned woman of about 20 who had silver hair. From the medals on her chest, it seemed she had spent an even longer time on the battlefield than Froleytia who had worked her way up from being a child soldier.

“Let me be blunt. We have no interest in whether Sladder Honeysuckle survives. We merely want the technological information he possesses. It just so happens that the most efficient way to get it is to support his defection.”

“And if you send an Object across national boundaries and into our Amazon district to do that, you will be causing a war on all sides. This is no mere skirmish. This could lead to our home countries

being targeted. Do you understand that? Is this really that valuable to you?"

"There are a few different ways of avoiding that. For example, you could attack the Mass Driver conglomerate base yourself and hand over any data on Honeysuckle's technology that you might find. I believe that would solve this problem."

"…Do you really think the Capitalist Corporations would go along with that?"

"No." The image of Lendy on the screen smiled. "But such trivial matters are none of our concern. Even if war breaks out between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Capitalist Corporations, that does not affect us in the Information Alliance any."

"I suppose not," agreed Froleytia.

But that was exactly why she had no duty to cooperate with them.

"What is it you are prepared to go this far to get?" asked Froleytia.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It is true the high power railgun that acts as the main cannon of the Break Carrier – that is, the Mass Driver conglomerate Object – is powerful. Its construction likely requires the application of the mass driver which is a crystallization of space development technology. However, it would be in the format of the Capitalist Corporations military. It may not conform to the standards and compatibility of an Information Alliance Object. Is it really worth going this far for?"

"You misunderstand. It is not that high power railgun we are after."

"?"

"This is the 'Mass Driver' conglomerate we are talking about. What we want is space launch technology. Many agencies and organizations are continuing research into the construction of electromagnetic space development bases. However, due to a lack of technology, a lack of development funds, a lack of safety, and unease due to the worldwide format shifting toward laser space elevators, they have all come to a standstill. We can create railguns as weapons, but we cannot use that technology to create mass drivers that can safely, cheaply, and stably transport goods and personnel. It is rather ironic." Lendy spoke smoothly. "Currently, no

one but that conglomerate has successfully mass produced them on a practical level. It would be such a shame to let that technology die out. We respect their technological culture and have determined it to be worthy of preserving. That is why we are gladly accepting Honeysuckle's defection after he tried and failed to get that mass driver technology adopted."

Froleytia frowned at the Information Alliance lieutenant colonel's words.

What she was saying was odd.

"Are you trying to confuse me? I thought the Information Alliance's new shuttles used laser space elevators just like ours. Gaining that railgun-focused mass driver technology will serve you no purpose."

"Yes, for now." The silver-haired brown woman named Lendy Farolito's words seemed to hold deep meaning. "At the moment, laser space elevators are the more efficient method. However, we have no idea how long that established theory will last. …It is not unusual for weaknesses and problems to be discovered in such things. If we have no alternative once that happens, we will be in trouble. That is what the mass driver technology is for."

"…"

Froleytia remained silent.

There was some sense to what the other woman said.

However…

"You are willing to take actions that have a 100% chance of causing a war in order to resolve a problem that may or may not ever even occur?"

"Yes," replied Lendy without hesitation. "When you have a weapons development race, it seems you scrap the loser. However, we find that to be too much of a waste. If the two technologies rival each other, it is best to preserve both of them. And we do not merely store the data away. We preserve even the familiarity with the technology on the worker's fingertips. That way the information is 'alive' and can be used at any time."

"…"

“That massive and overwhelming collection of data may seem meaningless at first glance, but it serves to protect us from unforeseen worldwide trouble. If you loathe wasting bullets and hold back on your barrage of the enemy, you cannot stop the enemy’s advance. Even if it is meaningless at first, the thicker that barrage becomes, the safer we are.”

“Perfect browsing…?” muttered Froleytia in annoyance.

The Information Alliance was trying to create a system that would display how to resolve a worldwide crisis just by typing a string of text into a search engine.

“However, you will lose any reason to go ahead with that plan of yours if you lose the ability to take in Sladder Honeysuckle,” said Froleytia. “This will all be over if we kill Honeysuckle and destroy the Mass Driver conglomerate’s data before the Information Alliance Object being prepared on the Parima district border is ready. If you are sure to gain the mass driver technology, that is one thing. However, I doubt your superiors will approve a mission that will cause a war if the odds of acquiring the desired information are exceedingly low.”

“True,” admitted Lieutenant Colonel Lendy Farolito. However, her smile remained as she continued. “But can you really do that?”

“…”

“If Sladder Honeysuckle were to destroy the Legitimacy Kingdom Object, you would have nothing left to stop our advance.”

After ending the transmission with the Legitimacy Kingdom, Lendy Farolito sank down in the sofa. The Parima district was also just below the equator, so it was hotter than 30 degrees. Those who were not an officer like her were likely dripping with sweat due to having to work without air conditioning.

Lendy got up from the sofa and pulled some brandy out from a small refrigerator similar to those in hotels. She used her brown fingers to pour the liquid in a large glass while using voice recognition mode to connect to the maintenance base zone’s hangar.

Her question was straight and to the point.

“How much longer until our Generation 2 Gatling 033 can head out?”

“I can be out there annihilating anything and everything in another half hour. Oh ho ho.”

Part 11

He thought his body had been roasted from the inside.

Lying on his back, Quenser tried to groan, but no sound whatsoever escaped his lips. His throat was oddly dry. An afterimage seemed to cover his vision in a white screen and it would not go away. Intense pain ran through his ears and he did not even hear a ringing.

The LED on his radio was blinking.

After a few seconds, Quenser was finally able to hear the sound.

His brain sent a signal to his fingers and he grabbed the radio from the ground with motions reminiscent of a poorly-made robot. He did his best to move his cracked lips.

“…Are you…okay? For an instant, it almost looked like the Object was floating…”

“How are you Quenser?”

“I somehow managed…to avoid getting roasted like in a grill where the flame is too high…”

He of course should have been killed instantly.

However, the prototype reactor placed beneath the princess’s Object had been set so the blast would travel upwards. The same was done for normal bombs. Depending on how the bomb was set, the destructive force would change. To destroy a more solid target, a cup-shaped metal plate would be placed around the bomb to focus the blast on a single point.

Of course, no normal metal plate could do anything to alter a blast from a prototype reactor going critical.

(Did they use a spare piece of Object onion armor?)

“Everything below me was completely taken out, so I can’t move,” said the princess.

“Dammit. So the blast took out the entire propulsion device. Does that mean we have to put together a plan that only uses your cannons?”

“No, the countdown has begun.”

“The countdown?”

“The system has determined it needs to prevent the enemy from capturing the Object. I am working to cancel the command, but I do not think I can keep up with the speed of the system.”

“A self destruct system…!?”

When the giant weapons known as Objects were being used, one thing had to be avoided at all costs: letting the enemy capture one of your Objects and analyzing the technology. The princess’s Object had a self destruct system installed to prevent that from happening.

The system would gauge the damage done and make the decision automatically to account for the possibility of the pilot Elite being knocked unconscious.

The princess had said she could not stop it.

At the current rate, the Baby Magnum would explode. The explosion would likely cover even more distance than the one from the prototype reactor. The blast from a bomb on the surface would spread farther than one buried underground.

And then the princess added, “Pattern B does not activate the self destruct.”

“What do you mean?”

Apparently, the automatic anti-capture safety system had a few different levels. If the program determined that nothing at all could be done, the Object would be blown up from the inside as soon as the Elite was ejected in order to prevent the leakage of technological information. However, Pattern B did not go that far.

Pattern B only ejected the pilot Elite. After that, the humans could

decide if the Elite would pilot an identical model or successor Object or if the damaged Object would be recovered and repaired. If the situation worsened and it seemed the enemy would capture the Object after all, the Elite could send a commander class signal to blow up the Object remotely. Normally, the Object shut out external signals to prevent hacking, but the numerous hatches were opened in an emergency. This allowed a radio signal to reach it.

After explaining all that, the princess said, “I’m sorry, Quenser. I knew losing the Object here would put a major burden on you and the others, and yet…”

“I-it’s okay. We’re the ones that made you fight despite the damage done by the Break Carrier. You don’t need to worry about it.”

Despite what Quenser said, he could not hide his unease.

Objects were synonymous with war.

Everyone knew how much more likely soldiers were to die once theirs was lost.

The Mass Driver conglomerate had been fighting with a prototype reactor rather than a 2nd Object, but they could not let their guard down. Without their Object, they would be forced into a war between flesh and blood soldiers. They had no idea who would win in such a conflict.

And it was also possible cutting edge Objects would be coming in from the Information Alliance and the Capitalist Corporations. If that happened, they had no way of winning without an Object of their own.

Quenser placed a hand on the wall and slowly stood up.

(This means we really do have to end this as quickly as possible. We need to incapacitate the Mass Driver conglomerate to prevent anyone else from joining the fray…)

“At any rate, we need to get away from here. It’ll eject you automatically, right? Can you send your estimated landing point to my handheld device? That way I can meet up with you as quickly as possible.”

“I’m sending it to you now. I will be ejected in 700 seconds.”

Hearing that, Quenser pulled out his handheld device. He then ran in the direction of the princess's estimated landing point. The course took him right by the side of the Object.

The cityscape had been utterly destroyed for about 200 meters in every direction from the Object. The asphalt had been ripped up and the empty buildings had collapsed. One building was tilted to the side. It was only still partially upright because the princess's Object was supporting it. The bottom half of the Baby Magnum's spherical body had melted.

(I should ask for help from the other soldiers.)

Quenser made his request in a businesslike manner over the radio.

The ruins of Amazon City were huge. The soldiers had been spread throughout the entirety of the city and would contact the princess's Object if they discovered enemy soldiers or important facilities. That way the Object could immediately attack. That meant the soldiers were very spread out. At the very least, Quenser saw no sign of other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers as far as he could see.

He sent his request, but he doubted any reinforcements would arrive any time soon.

He had also received no word from Heivia after the other boy had fallen down through the cracks and into the underground mall. Since the prototype reactor had been set up underground, that silence was not exactly comforting.

(Dammit, this gives me a bad feeling. That bastard had better not have gotten himself killed.)

Due to his previous experiences, Quenser had one fear.

A pilot Elite that had lost her Object became a top priority target for the enemy troops. Whether any Objects of same or similar models existed or not, the possibility that the Elite could pilot another Object made it crucial to eliminate her immediately.

And…

The Mass Driver conglomerate had calculated everything out beforehand so the princess's Object would be destroyed at that exact point.

(They don't have an anti-aircraft gun or something set up at the point they expect her to land after ejecting, do they!?)

With that thought in mind, Quenser ran as quickly as he could. As he did, he naturally looked up at the majestic Object. The princess would be shot diagonally up in a parabola from the upper back portion of the spherical body.

But…

(What is that?)

Quenser stopped running and froze up in shock.

(There's something spread across blocking the ejection point!? What is it? A…steel net?)

Normally, Objects had several anti-air lasers used to accurately shoot down fighters or ballistic missiles. However, that prototype reactor explosion had just occurred. While it had robbed the princess of her senses like a stun grenade, someone may have fired a bazooka to place that net there.

The net would not do any damage to the Object.

In fact, it was likely a weapon meant to capture people, not kill them.

However…

(It's blocking…the ejection point?)

Quenser pulled out a small pair of binoculars and checked on the area around the ejection point.

The net was attached so that it dug into the ejection point hatch. This made the automatically opening hatch unable to open.

An Object was 50 meters across.

The long ramp leading from the center to the ejection point automatically moved the Elite at extremely high speed. But if the hatch did not open at the end…

(She'll run into it at over 100 kph!?)

"Wait a second, princess! Can you stop the ejection countdown!?"

“?”

“Someone has intentionally blocked the hatch! If the ejection system activates now, you’ll be slammed into a thick steel plate!!”

He heard her gasp.

Most likely, she did not have time to stop the automatically determined course of action.

“Shit!!”

Quenser clicked his tongue and started running again.

He felt heat on his skin as he approached the center of the blast.

The prototype reactor explosion had caused many buildings to collapse. One of those buildings was leaning diagonally against the Baby Magnum. Quenser charged into the building, leapt into an elevator shaft that no longer had a door, and ran through the leaning building. Luckily, the shaft’s wall had plenty of uneven portions due to metal beams and the like, so it functioned similar to a staircase with the building tilted.

The countdown continued.

Only a few minutes remained until the ejection.

Quenser reached for the bag on his back and pulled out a rectangular plastic explosive. He stabbed an electric fuse into the Hand Axe.

Just as he was moving to switch the radio channel for the detonation, he heard a violent clanking noise come from the speaker.

The cockpit’s automatic ejection system had activated.

There were a few dozen meters to the ejection point, but that distance would be covered in only a few seconds. And once she reached there, it was all over. She would collide with the metal plate at over 100 kph.

At that same time, Quenser saw what functioned as an exit to the tunnel. It was originally where the elevator opened up onto the roof of the building, but it was missing its door.

But he was not going to make it.

He could see the exit, but it would take him too long to reach it.

(Dammit…)

“Make iiiitttt!!” screamed Quenser as he threw the plastic explosive as hard as he could. It flew through the rectangular exit and left Quenser’s vision.

It was a desperate gamble.

Quenser hit the switch on the radio and the Hand Axe detonated.

An explosion roared.

Gray dust flew in through the exit.

During it all, Quenser continued to run.

A few seconds later, he finally exited to the diagonal rooftop. The concrete floor had crumbled away at the point he exited at and his feet struck the steel body of the Object instead.

And…

He heard something being ejected. He looked up into the blue sky and saw the princess wrapped in the special suit of an Elite. At the last second, the blast had blown away the net blocking the ejection point hatch. If he had been even an instant slower, she would have been killed by her own safety device.

(She’s…safe…?)

The princess’s parachute opened and Quenser breathed a sigh of relief.

But then he heard a noise. He turned around and saw someone else standing on top of the Object’s spherical body over 10 meters away from him. A man stood hidden behind one of the Object’s weapons. It was one of the smaller weapons, but it was still a few meters tall.

The man wore a white lab coat over a military uniform.

That lab coat had multiple types of spray paint sprayed on it to create camouflage.

His rounded face had a slight beard as well as a look of weariness that was likely thanks to his life on the run. However, the most overwhelming impression he gave was that of a wild beast.

He held a handgun.

And he was aiming it at the princess as she floated down on her parachute.

“!!”

Quenser pulled out some Hand Axe plastic explosive, but he did not have time to put in the electric fuse. He simply threw the clay-like mass through the air in a parabolic arc.

The man noticed it immediately.

And he mistakenly assumed it was going to explode.

The man frantically jumped behind a different cannon. In so doing, he lost his chance to shoot. After a second or two, he must have realized it was a fuse-less bluff because he then turned the gun on Quenser.

(Shit!?)

Quenser frantically hid behind yet another cannon.

Lead bullets caused sparks to fly from the steel cannons that stuck up with a certain regularity like roadside trees.

“From the Legitimacy Kingdom military, are you?” said the man as he hid behind the pillar without letting his guard down. “It seems that young lady is quite well liked by this unit.”

“Who are you?” asked Quenser as he pulled a plastic explosive from his bag and actually put in an electric fuse this time. “Who are you?”

He received no response.

Instead, more 9mm bullets came his way. Sparks flew from the steel cannon Quenser was hiding behind, so he instinctually ducked down.

It was best not to let the other man know he had no gun.

If he realized Quenser was a combat engineer who only had bombs, he would make a more proactive attack.

As Quenser came to that conclusion, the man's words reached his ears.

The man had either learned what little Quenser could do from the previous exchange or he had a relatively steady personality. Whatever the reason, the man's voice showed no sign of worry.

"Sladder Honeysuckle."

That changed the look on Quenser's face.

And the next comment made him frown even further.

"I am a military advisor for the powerful president of one of the Mass Driver conglomerate's companies, one of the Capitalist Corporations leading investors, an Object designer…and the man you in the Legitimacy Kingdom most want to kill."

Part 12

Sladder Honeysuckle.

If he was taken out, the war that had begun in Antarctica could be brought to an end. It seemed a bit strange for a VIP like him to be on the front lines, but Quenser's mind was focused on something else.

He was an Object designer.

Was that why he had been able to take advantage of the princess's Baby Magnum's weaknesses and defeat it? Would he have been unable to achieve such results by simply putting together a plan and having other soldiers carry it out?

(We're the same…)

Quenser lowered his gaze to the plastic explosive he had put an electric fuse in. On a few occasions, he too had used his knowledge as a student of Object design to destroy those giant weapons.

There was no sign of any other soldiers either ally or enemy.

The explosion of the prototype reactor had been so large scale that it had likely been obvious the Baby Magnum was seriously damaged even from a distance. However, the soldiers still had to continue with their firefights. They could not break formation and reorganize.

From the status of supplies and the number of soldiers, the Legitimacy Kingdom should have had the overwhelming advantage. However, it seemed unlikely they could end it immediately. There was nothing else for them to rely on as they fought with all of their ability.

“Can you really just take your time like this?” asked Sladder in a voice void of concern.

(He’s checking on what I have available to me.)

Sladder had let Quenser know where he was with his voice, but Quenser did not fire a single shot at him. That would tell Sladder that Quenser did not have a gun.

“If you do not kill me right away, the Information Alliance and the Capitalist Corporations will invade. If they learn the Legitimacy Kingdom Object is no longer functioning, they can use that to claim they are merely trying to ‘protect the neighboring countries from a terrorist organization’.”

“Is that what you’re after?”

“Do you think it is?”

They were about 10 meters apart. Quenser was hiding behind one of the cannons that stuck up with a regularity similar to roadside trees. Sladder was hiding behind a different cannon.

Ten meters.

Even if handguns had a relatively short range, that was close enough for him to have almost perfect accuracy. Quenser looked around the area, but even moving to a neighboring cannon would be a risky move. If Sladder circled around, he would be in trouble.

Quenser pressed up against the cool steel of the cannon and wet his lips with his tongue.

If he did not buy time using conversation, use the enemy's voice to determine his location, and put together a plan to overwhelm the enemy, he would be cornered in no time.

(Dammit. If only Heivia was here with his rifle…)

Would Heivia even be able to come if Quenser contacted him over the radio? In fact, Quenser and Sladder were standing atop a giant Object. Heivia might not have to come all the way there. It was possible he could snipe with his rifle while still on the ground.

With that thought in mind, Quenser operated his radio so Sladder would not notice and opened his mouth to speak.

"Give up. The Mass Driver conglomerate no longer has an Object. That high power railgun in the center of the city is too big to shoot from the ground. Not to mention that you no longer have your prototype reactor. Even if you defeat us here, you have no future."

"How pessimistic. I thought you knew that we of the Mass Driver conglomerate had asked to defect to the Information Alliance."

"Do you really think they'll live up to that?"

Quenser felt an urge to click his tongue as he looked at his radio.

He was sending a signal to Heivia, but he was getting no response. It was possible Heivia's radio had broken or that he had been knocked unconscious.

"When you get there, it is likely nothing but torture that awaits you. Once they get as much information on mass driver technology as they can get out of you, they'll hand you over to the Capitalist Corporations. Some other country isn't going to trust someone who betrayed their original country. You should know that."

“True enough.” Sladder’s voice was as unworried as ever even as the faults in his life plan were pointed out. “But only if information on mass driver technology was my only present for them.”

“?”

“Why do you think I went to all this effort?” Sladder fired two or three more shots at the side of the cannon. “If we had wanted to, we could have sent our Lisolette out at once. Her maximum range is 3000 kilometers. If we had her waiting in the Antarctic Ocean, we could have destroyed your Object instantly.”

“…”

Lisolette.

For an instant, Quenser thought that was the name of the enemy’s Elite, but an instant later he realized it was the official name of the Mass Driver conglomerate Object that the Legitimacy Kingdom had called the Break Carrier. The Capitalist Corporations had a tradition of giving Object’s female names. It was likely an extension of the tradition of giving hurricanes female names.

Quenser toyed with the Hand Axe in his hand.

“What are you trying to do?” he asked.

“Destroy an established theory,” replied Sladder briefly. “Objects are synonymous with war. Modern wars are won or lost based on the specs of the Objects. If it is known that one side will have one more Object than another, the winner can be known before the fighting even begins. This clarity does make these wars very safe in a certain sense of the word, but there are plenty of people who wish to overthrow that theory.”

“You don’t mean…”

“Defeating an Object without using one yourself. That is the desire of all those who wish to deny that theory. And I have taken action to make it a reality. The anti-tank position made up of small spare cannons in Antarctica, the high power railgun used as a decoy, and the explosion of the prototype reactor. After testing out all of that, I have some data the Information Alliance should be very interested in.”

Objects were said to cost 5 billion dollars at the very least. But what

if you could destroy one with only the parts rather than an assembled Object? That would only be a fraction of the cost, if not a fraction of a fraction.

The Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization.

The modern wars fought between those world powers were not on the ridiculous scale of a total world war. They were made up of small scale skirmishes, the Object development race that supported those skirmishes, and the acquisition and loss of funds or economic power. The standard method of carrying out these worldwide wars was to drive the enemy power into an economic situation where they could no longer keep up the war.

In that situation, the technology to assuredly destroy an Object that costs over 5 billion dollars at a fraction of the cost would be an incredibly valuable card to have in your deck.

That is of course only if such technology existed.

“Too bad. The primary damage done to our princess was not due to your tricks. It was the Break Carrier’s bombardment in the Iguazu district. If it wasn’t for that, she might have been able to avoid your prototype reactor.”

“The Break Carrier? Oh, that’s your codename for Lisolette.” Sladder somehow seemed to be enjoying himself. “That is merely an issue of degree. I am not a researcher in that field. I merely needed to protect myself and acquire something I can use to gain safe refuge somewhere where I can freely develop mass drivers. For that reason, it was actually more effective to not pull it off perfectly. It is much better to be a few steps away from perfecting this dream come true for them. After all, if it was already perfected, some of them might just want to torture it out of me.”

“…”

If the incredibly valuable technology still required some more research, they would have to keep Sladder alive so he could continue that research. They could not just torture him or hand him over to the Capitalist Corporations. Sladder had intentionally made his results so-so, so that the entire Mass Drive conglomerate would not be abandoned by the Information Alliance.

It was a dangerous gamble.

If he did too well, they might determine they could make Sladder's research a reality without him. However, if he did not do well enough, they might determine that Sladder's ideas were nothing more than a pipedream.

When faced with the overwhelming power of an Object, he had needed to produce results that were in that sweet spot between too much and too little.

That was many, many times more difficult and dangerous than simply recklessly heading in to destroy an Object with some bombs.

"I don't believe it," said Quenser. "You let the Break Carrier be destroyed for that? Did the Break Carrier's pilot agree to that?"

"To be honest, it wasn't all planned out to that extent."

Sladder's tone dropped a bit.

He may have been recalling the face of that Elite.

"I only started seriously thinking about securing refuge with the technology to destroy an Object without an Object after Lisolette was destroyed. The plan at the time was to negotiate with the Information Alliance using Lisolette. That long distance bombardment using a combination of a method of aiming using the chaff missile clouds and the high power railgun is a good bargaining chip, don't you think? Our Elite could control it best and we could maintain it best. You could say what we actually used was the Plan B we had prepared ahead of time."

"…"

(The Mass Driver conglomerate passed through Central America. To get to the Iguazu district, they had to pass by the Parima district at the northernmost part of South America. If their plan was simply to ask the Information Alliance for help, they would have had no reason to go to the Iguazu district. That means they were either planning to create their own independent nation or that they still needed data on the Break Carrier or the non-Object tactics to use in negotiations.)

Had Sladder simply been very lucky?

Or had his excessive preparedness saved him?

Quenser had a feeling it was both. By taking in everything he could by coincidence or necessity, that monster had gained the nature of the ultimate pawn. That was not something that could be gained merely by natural talent or merely by hard work.

“None of it really matters,” said Sladder Honeysuckle the Strategist quietly. “All that we want is an environment in which to develop mass drivers. It does not matter to us if the balance of the current Object-oriented battlefield is destroyed. Those giant things can do nothing but kill.”

“…I see.” Quenser checked on the plastic explosive in his hand once more. He toyed with the Hand Axe in his hand. “It seems we cannot come to an understanding.”

“What part of that did you have a problem with?”

“The part where you want to hide in the shadows and benefit from the Objects and Elites that are fighting on the battlefield. And the part where you have no problem blaming others and viewing yourself as blameless when your own Object is destroyed.”

He spoke with conviction.

It was because he felt that way that Quenser was standing there at that moment.

He had come there to force open the blocked ejection point hatch rather than abandoning the princess and her destroyed Object.

However…

His words only made Sladder laugh.

As they were both hiding behind upwards-pointing cannons, Quenser could not see his expression, but he heard his laugh. Sladder’s shoulders were likely moving up and down.

“You’re one to talk.”

Sladder’s tone of voice gave Quenser an ominous feeling.

Quenser naturally tensed up even more.

“You’re the one that has ended several wars with the smallest amount of damage by blowing up the Objects from the very beginning. Isn’t that right, Quenser Barbotage?”

(How does he know my name!?)

Quenser was utterly shocked, but he was not given time to respond.

Gunshots rang out and sparks flew from the upwards-pointing cannon he was hiding behind.

However, this was no threat or warning.

He also heard approaching footsteps partially masked by the gunshots.

(He's coming!?)

Quenser immediately leaned out from behind the cannon to throw the plastic explosive in the direction of the noise.

But he got kicked instead.

Quenser was crouched on one knee to throw the bomb, but a heavy strike struck his face before he could.

"Gah…!?"

Quenser's head was horribly shaken and he was knocked rolling backwards. The bomb he had been about to throw fell down onto the Object's spherical body.

And then Sladder aimed his handgun at close range.

"You're more famous than you think. …Especially among those who gather the best of their technology to create Objects."

"!!"

Quenser did not have time to get up, so he frantically rolled to the side in order to evade. However, he gained more momentum than he had expected. A second later he realized he was starting to roll down the slant of the spherical body.

(Not good… If I roll any further, I'll be headed straight for the ground!!)

Quenser managed to stop his momentum, but then a gunshot rang out.

At the same time, a blazing pain ran through his left shoulder.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

“Don’t get so worked up. It only grazed you. It didn’t even take out the joint.”

Quenser clenched his teeth as he held his burning shoulder with his other hand.

At the same time, a twinge of doubt entered his mind.

Sladder should have had no reason to hold back.

“I had no real reason.” Sladder Honeysuckle smiled calmly. “I started out as an engineer. To be honest, I’m almost entirely self-taught when it comes to guns. I tried shooting at you as you rolled and I just so happened to hit your shoulder.”

They were only 3 meters apart.

Someone well versed in a specialized martial art might have been able to take the gun from him. However, a student like Quenser had no such ability.

Meanwhile, Sladder accurately aimed the gun at him.

“So I will make sure to kill you when the time comes. Oh, and it seems that time is now.”

“…Then you should have shot every bullet you had rather than just shooting once.”

“?”

“If you don’t put every effort into this, people can take advantage of it like this.”

As he spoke, Quenser held out his uniform’s jacket to show the inside.

Sladder assumed he had a gun, so he immediately prepared to pull the trigger, but then he stopped.

A clay-like object was hanging from Quenser’s belt.

It was a Hand Axe plastic explosive with an electric fuse inserted.

“Kh!?”

“Should you be taking aim like that?”

As he spoke, Quenser held his thumb against the switch on the radio he held in one hand. Even if he was accurately shot in the head, he could very well press the button when he collapsed. That would blow Sladder away as well.

(Damn you!!)

Sladder leapt behind a nearby upward-pointing cannon to avoid the blast.

However, he then realized something.

It was about that detonator Quenser had.

He had been using a radio to send the detonation signal.

A radio.

Yes.

(Wait a second. Would he really have that switch set on a direct connection with the bomb hanging from his belt!?)

That worry brought unease and the unease grew into fear.

However, Quenser did not wait.

He unhesitatingly pressed the switch.

A great noise and a shockwave exploded out.

However, they came from directly behind Sladder as he hid behind the upwards-pointing cannon.

When Sladder had kicked Quenser’s face, the bomb Quenser had been about to throw had fallen onto the Object’s body. They were now down where Quenser had almost fallen off whereas that bomb had still been up nearer to the top of the Object. Quenser had kept the focus on himself while detonating the bomb directly behind Sladder.

There was a good distance between Sladder and the bomb, but the blast was still strong enough to send him flying through the air.

Sladder flew a few meters before striking the spherical body made of steel once more. From there, he rolled. He finally came to a stop near Quenser.

Quenser crouched down to pick up the handgun Sladder had dropped.

He then held the barrel against Sladder's head.

Sladder let out a groan, but Quenser uttered only one word.

"Checkmate."

Epilogue

With their leader, Sladder Honeysuckle, captured, the Mass Driver conglomerate's morale and ability to continue with its operation dropped considerably.

The Baby Magnum could no longer continue fighting, but the "unrefined old-fashioned methods of fighting war" such as foot soldiers and tanks allowed the Legitimacy Kingdom to succeed.

And so the war with the Mass Driver conglomerate that began in Antarctica and continued into the Legitimacy Kingdom's Amazon district was finally over.

The Mass Driver conglomerate had originally been a large organization that supported a large part of the Capitalist Corporations. The Capitalist Corporations insisted the Mass Driver conglomerate had gone on a rampage they had been unable to stop, but they were still unable to avoid all responsibility. Most likely, the Legitimacy Kingdom would be able to gain a few advantageous treaties with the Capitalist Corporations.

Similar responsibility could not be tied to the Information Alliance. They had intended to advance their military across national borders and into the ruins of Amazon City to carry out Sladder Honeysuckle's request, but intentions were no more than intentions. They had not actually carried out those intentions, so they were able to evade any responsibility.

"It seems the Mass Driver conglomerate will be judged under Legitimacy Kingdom law," said Heivia.

Quenser and Heivia were inside an Object manufacturing plant in the Amazon district. The princess's Object was undergoing repairs for all the damage it had taken during the various battles. The giant box-like facility was similar to the ones in shipyards. However, they had not brought the Object to the plant. Instead, the plant had been broken down into parts and set up around the damaged Baby Magnum.

As he watched giant cranes removing the broken and unmoving main cannons, Quenser replied to Heivia.

"Well, we did manage to end this in our territory."

“It seems both the Capitalist Corporations and the Information Alliance have requested we hand over Sladder Honeysuckle and the others, but they both know it’s a ridiculous request. Going along with it would be the same as admitting extraterritoriality,” said Froleytia as she smoked her long, narrow Japanese-style kiseru languidly while leaning against a metal railing.

Quenser looked at the face of his bluish silver-haired commander.

“…Honeysuckle and the others? …So what’s going to happen to the Mass Driver conglomerate now?”

“Who knows. Even here in the Legitimacy Kingdom people are arguing over whether we should simply execute them or if we should try to get technological information out of them. If you had just shot him there, this would have been a lot simpler. I told their major general that we would do just that.”

“…”

“Did you not shoot him because your circumstances were similar?”

“I don’t know.”

Quenser shook his head.

Sometimes he felt like doing what he was doing was taking a hugely roundabout course. He had left his safe country school to come to the battlefield as a battlefield student in order to learn about Object design. He had felt at the time like he was doing something similar to skipping a few grades, but he now sometimes felt like it would have been faster to have just continued studying at the school.

However, there may have been things one could not learn in a school.

For example, the faint hatred Quenser had glimpsed in Sladder. And the feeling of not being able to pull the trigger at the last second. Those things would not necessarily be of any use, but they were also things he was unlikely to ever forget.

Especially if he ever actually designed Objects to send to the battlefield.

“But it did make me think about why we are fighting.”

“?”

“I wondered if it was really necessary to kill Honeysuckle back there in order for us to survive.”

“You soft bastard,” muttered Heivia.

Quenser agreed with him.

The princess had been carrying out some work elsewhere, but now she approached them. She had likely been informing the maintenance soldiers how she liked the “feel” of the controls so they could carry out the overall repairs of the Object. She had been the one in the most danger during the entire incident. Her expressionless face looked more weary than usual.

“They say the repairs should take 2 weeks. We cannot move until then,” she said.

“I did call in another Legitimacy Kingdom Object from another area. Even if something unexpected happens, we won’t be forced to deal with it ourselves,” said Froleytia as if she was double checking the schedule.

The princess turned to Quenser and said, “Thank you for everything.”

“You too,” said Quenser before looking up at what was in the center of the plant.

It was the giant weapon known as an Object.

While looking up at that mass of steel that had been damaged too badly to move due to numerous attacks, Quenser muttered, “…The destruction of an established theory, hm?”

That was what Sladder Honeysuckle had said his objective was.

However, it might have been Quenser and Heivia who had pulled that trigger.

Yes.

It was them who had been destroying Objects with plastic explosives.

“It isn’t just us. More and more people are starting to think about

destroying Objects without using one themselves.”

“The established theories of history are overthrown surprisingly easily. Textbooks saying iron was first used by the Hittites in 1400 BCE said something completely different the following year.”

“Is this really a good thing?”

“Who knows.” Heivia shrugged. “But this Object-focused world is the result of something from the past being overthrown.”

…And after that nice ending line, Heivia suddenly grinned.

“Hey, by the way, Quenser. Didn’t we do quite well this time?”

“Ahn? What do you mean?”

“You blew away that Break Carrier Object, right? And I stopped the explosion of the Iguazu Dam. Not to mention that you captured the Mass Driver conglomerate’s commander alive. We prevented a three-way war between the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Information Alliance, so do you think we’ll get medals?”

“Oh!! You’re right, you’re right! It was pretty much all positive things!! The positives weren’t cancelled out by negatives brought in by the odd expectations of the higher ups this time! Now I can get a full bank account and draw closer to being a designer. And you’re that much closer to inheriting your noble family! Hooray! Hooray!!”

As those two idiots cheered and raised their hands in the air, their silver-haired, large-breasted commander cut them off while puffing out some sweet smoke from her long, narrow kiseru.

“…What are you saying? It was the princess that finished off the Break Carrier, not Quenser. That doesn’t count in your favor.”

“Hah?”

“And I may personally commend you for the defense of the Iguazu Dam, but from a purely ‘chain of command’ perspective, Corporal Bilany Saronno’s front lines scouting unit will likely be determined to be in the right. In other words, you were obstructing an official operation, Heivia. Especially since I never officially gave you

permission.”

“Eh?”

“And the operation in the ruins of Amazon City was carried out by the entirety of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. You may have just so happened to be near Honeysuckle, but it was not an independent action, so you get no special commendation for it. The entire unit might, though.”

“…Wait, we did all this and get nothing?”

“…You’re kidding, right? Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“I’m not done yet. You altered the trajectory of that small satellite in Antarctica which made us lose the chance to kill the Capitalist Corporations major general in that moon villa. That counts against you.”

“Uuh!?”

“Oh, and it seems you were treated to food and drink at a local coffee plantation in the Iguazu district. I said you could rest somewhere, but receiving goods from foreign civilians during a military operation is another minus.”

“Uuuh!?”

“And Quenser, you grabbed my breasts and slandered your commanding officer. That is a major minus.”

“What the hell did you do, Quenser you lucky bastard!?”

“Um, there were various circumstances that played into it…and don’t you have a fiancée!?”

As the two idiots started arguing, a cold look entered the princess’s eyes. However, Quenser was completely oblivious to this change.

Meanwhile, Froleytia continued speaking as if none of that was going on.

“Overall, the minuses are more prominent than the plusses. You need some military training in order to preserve the order of the unit. I’m thinking something like 300 lashes with a horse whip.”

“That would tear open our entire body!! We’d be so covered in red

no flesh color would remain!!”

“…Froleytia, are you still holding a grudge about that tits thing!? I’ll admit that feeling was well above average, but aren’t you putting too high a value on your breasts!?”

“Hmm. If you like, I could go with 10 lashes with a horse whip and 1 candle.”

“Wait, wait! That would turn us into wax models!!”

“No, this has gone well beyond the level of kinky. This has made its way to the absolutely bizarre!! I’ve never done anything to my commanding officer’s breasts, so why do I have to receive the same punishment as Quenser!?”

“Oh, do you want to die?”

The two idiots shook their heads at Froleytia’s question.

Their commanding officer smiled and said, “Then win back my trust with results. Do your job. Take a quick ride on a transport plane and destroy a certain god damn Object in a distant country.”

Afterword

The second volume!!

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

The battlefield still changed with each chapter this time, but I tried to make it feel more like one single novel than the previous volume did. How did you like the fight against the Mass Driver conglomerate?

A mention of the moon villas could be glimpsed in Volume 1's prologue, but I focused more on that part this time.

There were fewer direct battles against Objects than in Volume 1, but did you notice that there were about as many Objects present overall in this one?

Sladder Honeysuckle's strategy was not to use a completed Object, but to use the separate parts that make up an Object to their fullest. He used the main cannon, the secondary cannons, the armor, the reactor, and even the idea that "the enemy has an Object" individually.

I would say the idea to split apart a completed Object like that comes from the irregular way of thinking unique to designers of that world. It was a bit of a different approach from Quenser who mentally disassembles the enemy Object to search for a weakness.

The actual results were as you saw in the novel, but if Sladder's strategy had succeeded, it might have overturned the theory of war in that world. Perhaps Sladder could have been the protagonist of a different story.

…As the author, my intention was to focus on each individual part to demonstrate to the readers the grand scale of the completed Objects from various different angles. Do you think I pulled it off?

I view the relationship between the mass driver and the laser space elevator as being similar to the competition in the race to develop new fighter planes. The Mass Driver conglomerate was a loser of that race that refused to stop. Whenever I hear about the race to

develop stealth fighters or something, I have similar thoughts to what the Information Alliance lieutenant colonel said. It probably just shows that I know nothing about the topic, but I always feel it is such a waste for the loser because it is probably quite good too. Of course, there would probably be all sorts of problems if you tried to enter the production stage with both of them. That's why the competition to get chosen exists in the first place.

Also, I touched just a bit on the situation of the characters of Heivia, Froleytia, and Sladder. This may have made them seem more human when compared to Volume 1. However, what I wanted to get across first and foremost was the exhilaration of destroying the enemy. I would be lying if I said I was not worried this would have the opposite effect. So which way is better? Quenser, the princess, and even the old maintenance soldier lady have stories like that, but I am trying to think of ways to tell those stories while still bringing out that exhilaration.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Nagiryo-san and my editor, Miki-san. I am certain that it is the illustrations that get the cuteness of the heroines and the grandness of the Objects across to the readers. As before, I am truly thankful.

And I would like to thank the readers. I learned a lot from this novel as well. It is certainly thanks to all of your support that I had the chance to try out this more experimental story. Please continue your support in the future.

This time, they got a lot of help from the Object, but it might be fun to think of ways to defeat the Break Carrier without that help.

And so, I think I will end this here.

I lay down my pen while hoping this book will remain in your heart in some way.

Mach 25 goes well beyond a speed you can imagine in your head, doesn't it?

-Kamachi Kazuma

Heavy Object - Volume 02

Adoption War - *An Audition War*

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